

Disasters and catastrophes are part of life, and we have certainly had our share of these recently. Whether man-made, corporate, or acts of nature, we can't change the fact that we will experience them. The big question here is *how will we respond to them?* Our future depends on the answer.

Disasters come in all shapes and sizes. They can be man-made debacles at the corporate level. They can be tragic events in personal lives. They can be natural events that devastate individuals and entire communities. Life is full of these things, and as John Lennon said, "*Life is what happens when you are busy making other plans.*" The disasters of life interrupt us, and sometimes even stop us dead in our tracks. Regardless of the nature and causes of any kind of catastrophic event, in any place, the road to victory is the same. Leadership is the same, and requires the same skills, attitudes and actions. The questions are always the same. *What do I do now? Can I survive this? Can we survive this? Can we ever know victory again, or are we consigned to being mere victims?*

In my book, *UP: Pursuing Significance in Leadership and Life*, I present the "Summit Advance Model" which is based on the analogy of climbing a mountain consisting of three main levels. The lower and broadest level is SURVIVAL, the mid level is SUCCESS, and the top level is SIGNIFICANCE. In the wake of recent national and personal catastrophes, I was struck by how appropriate, and *needed*, the messages of this model are right now, especially as many see themselves in the "survival mode," but only as victims *barely* surviving. There are two sides to the SURVIVAL level, Victim and Victor. Victims, those who have survived these disasters, but with great losses, need the message of the mountain model to help them move from Victim to Victor.

You may be the leader of a large corporation that has recently experienced the most financially devastating event. You may be the leader of a community that was literally wiped off the map. Or you may be the leader of a family that has suffered great personal loss. It doesn't matter where or who you are. *You are leading victims out of survival, and into the victory of potential success.* I have distilled the main concepts of my model into ten critical keys that will help you lead yourself and others into shared victory. And one more thing to keep in mind. Leaders aren't just those we have designated as the ones we will follow. Leaders are anyone and everyone who will contribute to turning survival into success.

If you are such a leader, it is also important to remember that you are not just leading people who have experienced great loss. *YOU may have also experienced the same losses.* Before any of the steps outlined here can succeed, leaders must have personally worked through each of these keys internally. You will stand as role models, inspiration to others. You are the Sherpas who have climbed this mountain already and know every peak, crevasse, danger, safe crossing, and ultimately, every majestic vista of the future.

1. **RE-ESTABLISH EQUILIBRIUM. Shift outlooks from helpless to hopeful.** In any expected catastrophe, we have our legs knocked out from beneath us and initially respond and react "out of balance." Face the facts, we have been hit hard. But also keep a steady focus on the future. Concentrate on the practical, while holding on to the hopeful. Even in the darkest moment, after

the most overwhelming disaster or catastrophe, hope can always be found. Sometimes it takes a little while to discover it, but it is there. And it only takes a little hope to dispel a lot of darkness. Leaders must help others find the hope and begin to imagine the future. Regardless of the nature of the situation, a tendency toward self-pity is often the typical response, and while some of that is expected and even allowed, self-pity should be gently but firmly re-directed into shared mutual energy that can “potentialize” rather than “catastrophize.” Compassion is coupled with compelling purpose. This initial step is foundationally important to your future. Help people see and understand the present reality, and the future potential. Lead people out of denial, whether it is a denial of reality, or a denial of the future. Help them regain their equilibrium with a sense of purpose, acknowledge then work through fears, and focus on the positive, not the negative. Worry must turn to work, for a shared successful future.

2. **SHIFT FROM INTERNAL TO EXTERNAL FOCUS. Turn personal and corporate (community) focus from self to others.** Encourage a swing from a “me” mentality to a “we” mindset. There is no such thing as personal entitlement in these situations. Individuals may have lost much, but if an entire group is to move past survival into success or even significance, individual entitlement will only hinder, and possibly even prevent any success as a community. The leader must turn the eyes of followers from an internal focus to an external center of attention. There must be a shift from “me” to “you” and ultimately “us.” To face and overcome disasters, everyone must be onboard and everyone must be contributing equally toward the good of others – to the good of the group.
3. **ESTABLISH THE PROCESS. Employ a Standard Process.** There is a simple but very powerful model that can move people from stuck to striding, from frozen to freedom. The “**Three A’s**” will enable anyone to simplify any situation in order to establish the process desired to move through it, as well as incorporate and live pre-existing and new values. These easily remembered Three A’s are **ACKNOWLEDGE**, **ALIGN** and **ADVANCE**. They follow a logical sequence where each part of us is engaged, which in turn engages the next part. The mind acknowledges, which engages the heart to align, and together moves the body to advance.



ACKNOWLEDGE involves the head and ego, and means to recognize the existence of something, then to judge it and accept it as true. It is being aware of our thinking, belief systems and our behaviors. It is where we own and accept what is true. This is not just a matter of awareness. It means fully acknowledging what is true and real. It is also a dual critical step, where we acknowledge not only what has happened, or the reality of a present situation, but also the reality of our values, and *how* we will work through survival to success. This must happen individually, and corporately.

ALIGN begins in the mind, but will move to engage heart and spirit. Here the will kicks in and decides it is time to take action. New ideas, attitudes and behaviors are born, as we align our existing truths with desired truths and behaviors to close the gaps.

ADVANCE is the set of physical actions taken toward advancement. The body (*physical action*) reveals the breakthroughs in both the mind and the heart. Advance depends on the will and is the place of accountability.

The Three A's operate on dual levels. The PHYSICAL level: *Where are we now? Where do we want to be? How will we get there?* And the HEART (values) level: *WHO are we now? WHO do we want to be? WHO will we be when we get where we are going?*

Without moving through all the phases of the Three A's continually, progress slows and eventually stops. For that reason, everyday is an opportunity to stay on the right course, seeking and finding opportunities for advancement. The Three A's are not just a random singular cycle. This process is the vehicle that keeps you moving UP.

4. **PLAN AND PRIORITIZE. Meet immediate needs, set goals, develop plans.** We always hear about the importance of planning, so some tend to just roll their eyes at the mention of this, but the critical nature of planning well cannot be overemphasized. Good planning and prioritization is essential in times of disaster. Initially, it will be necessary to meet those *immediate* needs, and they will present themselves loud and clear. Leaders will need to carefully prioritize these actions, a sort of community "triage." Actions are quick at this stage, necessarily so, since often needs will quite literally be life and death, either figuratively or actually. Sometimes careful planning isn't always possible at this phase. Leaders must plan *on the fly* here. As soon as immediate needs are met, then comes the next real need – a sound plan based on thorough evaluation of what *is*, and what *needs to be*. Planning also necessitates flexibility, openness, calculated risks, strategies, reevaluation of plans, refinement, and even course corrections. The best advice I can give here is plan well, and work the plan *hard*.

5. **MAXIMIZE RESOURCES. Inventory and maximize what you have.** In times of devastation, natural or otherwise, our first response is often the human one – "*we've lost everything.*" But that is rarely true. Not *everything*. Even if we lose all physical resources, we still have intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and creative resources. Take stock of what you *do* have. Evaluate resources, including talents and skills, financial, available tools – essentially everything at your disposal, regardless of how small the resource or seemingly simple or unrefined the talents and skills. Everything and everyone will have a purpose. Find it, and use it. Don't overlook anything. Match *all* resources to accomplish goals. Maximizing resources will require thoughtful delegation, trust and empowerment. Failures may happen, but progress will continue on the whole, with back-up plans. Expect the best, plan for the rest, *using everything you have*.

6. **INSPIRE AND BE INSPIRED. Encourage personal and corporate inspiration.** What inspires you as leader, and others as team members? Example? Experiences? Hope? Faith...*in what?* God, the future, each other? Encourage everyone to draw on their personal sources of power and inspiration, and then to act as inspiration for others. Those who are seemingly without any will need yours. Immediately after a catastrophe or disaster of any kind, the world is seen through very

dark glasses. Lead others to the “light” – it does exist. These aren’t “pep” talks (*though they help on occasion!*) but the encouragement (and role modeling) of drawing from your deepest places of personal inspiration to continue the struggle out of victimhood to victory. Share personal stories, experiences, dreams. Trauma can paralyze – it is the leader’s job to energize into action. Remember also that patience and “long-suffering” are a form of inspiration to others, and will be sorely needed in any move from survival to success. Short fuses will probably abound until the gears of community involvement begin to mesh smoothly together. Be inspired yourself, and encourage your community members to do the same for each other. Remember that inspiration is not found in clichés or empty words. It is communicated through compassionate action.

7. **LIGHT THE PATH. Establish a vision, provide strong direction, light the path.** The “world” is in darkness after a disaster. People need light, order, and clarity. The community will adopt the mindset of the leader, and follow his or her lead, attitude, focus and commitment. They will follow the light you shine on the path ahead. It won’t always be easy, or without hurdles and dangers. Keep the light shining on your envisioned personal and shared future. If you can’t do the desired thing, do the *next best* thing. Don’t be discouraged at set-backs. Regroup, re-plan, redo. Be open to new ideas, and deal constructively with conflict (*unresolved conflict can completely extinguish vision and light*). In the middle of all this, your light as leader must remain bright, which will involve perseverance and long term endurance. Be a role model, maintain an optimistic outlook, encourage at every opportunity, praise the smallest accomplishments, re-emphasize shared goals, keep pushing forward. No matter how dark it seems, don’t let the light go out. Like hope, a little light burns off a lot of darkness.

8. **TALK, LISTEN AND HEAR. Establish efficient communication systems.** Deliberate efforts are required for an efficient system of communication, one of the most important and critical aspects to survival, recovery and success. Successful communication also requires openness, talking *and* listening, then actually *hearing* what people have to say. Keep everyone informed, encourage sharing, reporting, and accountability systems. Give everyone a voice, and hear all voices equally. Like planning, this key might seem mundane or over stressed, but there is a reason for that. Lack of communication will ensure defeat. Excellence in communication will ensure success. Establish and maintain a system that will work for your group. Emphasize its importance, encourage its consistent use. Set an example.

9. **ALL HANDS ON DECK. “Hands on” and all hands on deck.** Moving past the mere survival state requires everyone to “show up.” Everyone has gifts to bring, everyone contributes, everyone encourages, everyone benefits. Know and promote the value of community. Assign roles that match gifts and resources. Give everyone a personal sense of command, and a mutual sense of contribution. Everyone has something to offer, and that giving contributes to the overall sense of purpose and accomplishment. Every job is important, every role, every function, every *breath*. Every *person* is important to moving from victims to victors.

10. **LAUGH, LEARN AND CELEBRATE. Celebrate every step, every lesson, even the smallest of victories.** Find the humor, if possible, laugh together, cry together, work together, learn together and succeed together. Debrief together. *What have we learned? What has made us stronger? What are our victories? What are we thankful for?* It is interesting to note that those people who first sailed to our shores to eventually establish the greatest power on earth had no easy time of it. The Pilgrims dug more graves than they built huts and shelters. Yet, despite their hardship, they also took time to give thanks. They learned the hard lessons, and also celebrated the sometimes hard to find victories. In survival it is difficult to embrace the fact that life goes on, that it holds anything more than bitterness and sorrow. But it does, and recognition of that begins with celebration and thanks.

There are abundant experiences, stories and tales to tell that speak of victory from victimhood. But one stands out to me that may encourage you where you are now. Ernest Shackleton always wanted to be the first to the South Pole, but then Roald Amundsen beat him to it in 1911. Without missing a beat, Shackleton got to work preparing for a different kind of Antarctic exploration – “a transcontinental journey from sea to sea, crossing the pole.” He would do the *next best thing*. Shackleton made elaborate and careful plans, raised the financing under difficult circumstances, hired the crew and set sail with two ships for what was to be known as the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, or what would later be referenced simply as the “Endurance Expedition” (*“Endurance” was the name of one of the ships in the journey, the one captained by Shackleton*).

If you don’t already know this story, I will tell you the bottom line right here – *they failed*. They encountered disasters and catastrophes of monumental scope. Life happened. But if that were the end of the story, history would certainly not remember Ernest Shackleton with much more than a single line entry. It is not possible to tell the whole story here. You will have to research this one yourself, an exercise well worth your time.

The point I want to make is that this well-intentioned expedition failed in its ultimate goal and destination, but Shackleton refused to be a victim, and would not allow the other members of this team to go there either. Shackleton and the “Endurance Expedition” are now acclaimed as perhaps one of the most amazing and epic tales of endurance by men who would not quit, would not succumb to repeated failures and disasters, constant storms and endless obstacles. Time after time these men battled back up from unyielding loss and endless life-threatening adversities. Almost two years (*yes, years*) after being stuck in ice floes drifting helplessly in sub-freezing weather, every member of this expedition was saved without loss of life. Toes were lost, but not life. No one at home even expected they had survived after so much time. Yet they returned, and went on to other achievements. They not only survived, they were victorious. Through it all, Shackleton was determined to be a victor, not a victim, and his story stands as a testimony and a timeless example to victors everywhere.

Will yours?