

Surf The Chaos

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In any organization there is going to be a certain amount of chaos. It is an unpredictable world, and the global pressures have made mere survival a constant struggle. One can pine for the good old days when we could go to work at 8 am and check out at 5 pm, but those days are gone forever. We can wish that people would always do right, or customers never get angry, or the weather habitually cooperate, but none of those desires is realistic.

To keep from going insane or just withdrawing, we need to invent new defenses from the reality of our time. Chaos is going to happen. You are going to have at least three crises in the next six months and so am I. The good news here is that with practice and cunning, we can learn to ride the waves of chaos like a surfer does the ocean waves.

Rather than fight back against the incredible power of the sea, the surfer uses the momentum to climb up and make a game of it. That is what we need to learn how to do in business. Success belongs to those who can practice some simple precepts.

- 1. Train Well** - An unskilled surfer is a danger to himself as well as others. You need the proper gear and you need to know how and when to use it to be successful. Trying to navigate a complex outsourcing decision without solid international experience is as ridiculous as going out to surf using snow skis.
- 2. Be nimble** - Have the systems set up so that you can move with the vicissitudes of the current conditions. Anticipate as best you can what may happen, but be ready to veer off path at a moment's notice. Consider it a core competence to not be thrown off the surf board, rather cut and weave with the wave not only to survive the pounding surf but actually enjoy the ride.
- 3. Be flexible** - See your own paradigms and be willing to modify them or even let go completely to catch the next wave. The fluidity of changing conditions can be like a choppy sea that you are forced to fight against, or you can begin to recognize there are patterns and start paddling long before the wave is breaking upon you. Have bright

creative people on the team who know how to keep from being submerged and actually "shoot the curl" or "hang 10." Having these wonderful people is not enough; you must be prepared to listen to them and support their ideas.

4. Be undaunted - Unexpected things are going to surface like jellyfish in the water. You need to take all possible precautions and be vigilant, but there is a time to be courageous and strong as well. When you fall, and you will many times, learn from any mistakes you made, but by all means get back out there for another try. If you give up because of a specific failure, your muscles will stiffen and you will become calcified by the fear.

5. Be Alert - know the danger signals well and watch for them like you would a shark in the water. Courage is one thing, but being foolhardy with too much risk is likely to lose you a leg or more.

6. Be Smart - Great surfers know that each wave is different. They have the innate ability to know which wave to catch and which one to let pass. In business, you need to make decisions on engagement every day. Knowing which opportunities not to pursue is as important as knowing which ones to chase. To do well in this dimension, you need to have a great strategic plan. The strategy tells you both what to do and what not to do.

7. Be adaptable - every surfer knows there are new techniques being invented every day that can change the whole game for everyone. When there is the opportunity to learn a completely different way to do the job, dive in with full energy to learn it.

If you can practice these seven skills, then the waves of chaos and change will be stimulating aids to your success rather than the source of burnout or failure.



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