



Fidelis International Institute

Adversity

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Every person and organization has to overcome adversity, more or less severe. The difference between success and failure is how one copes with it.

This is what determines the rise and decline of people and groups. It is therefore crucial to accept calmly that adversity is part of life and a good opportunity to grow.

Here is a concrete example.

When Procter & Gamble invaded the paper-based consumer business in the late 1960s, Scott Paper (then the leader) simply resigned itself to second place without a fight and began looking for ways to diversify. "The company had a meeting for analysts in 1971 that was one of the most depressing I've ever attended," said one analyst. "Management essentially threw in the towel and said, 'We've been had.'" The once-proud company began to look at its competition and say, "Here's how we stack up against the best," and sigh, "Oh, well . . . at least there are people in the business worse than we are." Instead of figuring out how to get back on the offensive and win, Scott just tried to protect what it had. Conceding the top end of the market to P&G, Scott hoped that, by hiding away in the B category, it would be left alone by the big monster that had invaded its turf.

Kimberly-Clark, on the other hand, viewed competing against Procter & Gamble not as a liability, but as an asset. Darwin Smith and his team felt exhilarated by the idea of going up against the best, seeing it as an opportunity to make Kimberly-Clark better and stronger. They also viewed it as a way to stimulate the competitive juices of Kimberly people at all levels. At one internal gathering, Darwin Smith stood up and started his talk by saying, "Okay, I want everyone to rise in a moment of silence." Everyone looked around, wondering what Darwin was up to. Did someone die? And so, after a moment of confusion, they all stood up and stared at their shoes in reverent silence. After an appropriate pause, Smith looked out at the group and said in a somber tone, "That was a moment of silence for P&G."

The place went bananas. Blair White, a director who witnessed the incident, said, "He had everyone wound up in this thing, all up and down the company, right down to the plant floor. We were taking on Goliath!" (Jim Collins, *Good to Great*).

The same adverse situation, but two ways to cope with it.

There are several types of adversity. There are those that are not our fault or are out of our control, such as sicknesses, an economic crisis, a defeat, a loss, a disability, an emotional or professional failure. Others we cause ourselves. They are lifestyle choices, risky decisions, mistakes, ideals whose defense leads us to persecution or imprisonment. They allow us to step back if we change our choice.

Either way, whether they are our fault or not, it is extremely important to create an attitude beforehand of seeing what is good in everything. This is the first step in coping successfully with them.

This is not superficial optimism, but a proactive stance based on an objective understanding of reality.

What is this proactivity based on?

First, nothing is useless. Even the negative things have something worthwhile, if you know how to find it. This is the advice Lance Armstrong's mother gave him when his father beat and abused him. He applied this lesson to his passion for sports. Despite cancer, he won the Tour de France seven times.

Second, man has the ability to turn anything negative into something positive. "Curiously, nature, while it took away something very valuable, my sight, was giving me another, music. With one hand I let go of something as dear as seeing, but with the other I grasped firmly a crutch and priceless companion, music, another kind of 'seeing'" (Andrea Bocelli, *The Music of Silence*).

A third positive aspect of adversity is that even failures, whatever their nature, foster personal growth. They give us the lesson, sometimes written in blood, of what we must avoid in the future. That is already something positive.

Fourth, many determined and constant men have shown that with firm resolve we can overcome any obstacle, as Gustavo Zervino and his companions who survived the Andes demonstrated.

In particular, handicapped people show us that when we lack something, we can enhance other skills, as in the case of Helen Keller, Adriana Macias, Andrea Bocelli, and many others.

Ideas like these are very useful for any manager who wants to take his organization to success in the midst of the turmoil that must necessarily arrive.