

# Crisis leadership: Rising from fear into action

By Jessica Newhall

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In times of crisis, leaders find themselves unexpectedly immersed into what seems like icy cold water, swimming with unknown terrors. If you've ever participated in a "polar plunge," you'll recall the body's immediate and almost paralytic freezing of limbs, lungs and brain — only to immediately be followed by a panicked rush as the nervous system kicks in as a response to stress.

When business leaders find themselves in extremely stressful situations, such as what the current pandemic has delivered, it is only natural that their instincts try to force them into primal coping mechanisms. Depending on the individual, these responses can range from freezing in place, squeezing the eyes shut in hopes danger passes quickly, distracting oneself with unproductive behaviors or flailing wildly about in panic.

Contrast that to what our team at the Clatsop Small Business Development Center (CCC SBDC) has witnessed as it has responded over 150 requests for assistance from local business leaders at the helm of organizations of all types and sizes over the past six weeks. As we helped these leaders navigate the path to ensure their organizations emerge intact or even stronger from this crisis, some early indicators of successful leadership strategies have emerged, including:

- An ability to acknowledge the presence of fear and move through the unknown decisively.
- Identification of a common purpose, a "why?" that their staff and customers can rally around.
- Developing simple plans of action while allowing for flexibility and responsiveness to changing market conditions.
- Empowering team members to directly aid in achieving organizational goals.

No doubt, this will likely be one of the greatest periods of challenge local business leaders will collectively face, but we can look to history to give us hope. In the depths of the Great Depression, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said in his first inaugural address "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

On a recent free webinar held by the CCC SBDC for local business leaders, themed "Keeping the Lights On," retired and former CFO of Craft3 David Oser drew the parallels between FDR's timeless quote and managing through the current crisis: "This is not a platitude or somebody trivializing all the terrible things that were going on in 1933. What Roosevelt meant was that if you succumb to fear, if you give up to fear, if you let fear overwhelm you, you will not be able to do anything. Everything else you try to do will fail. That is the case here today. As business owners and business leaders, now is the time to recognize fear in yourself and the people you deal with — but also to say I will not, I cannot succumb to it. I will overcome these fears."

FDR's address also included a call to arms: "This is no unsolvable problem if we face it wisely and courageously. There are many ways in which it can be helped, but it can never be helped merely by talking about it. We must act and act quickly."

Returning briefly to the list of successful traits of our local business owners — they are immensely creative in their problem solving. That leads us to perhaps my favorite part of FDR's address: "Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort." May we find the inspiration and energy to act in that way.

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