

## Six Strategies for Conquering Adversity

by Christopher Novak



As senior leaders in a demanding environment, adversity is a normal part of our workday. We are the organization's pivot point, constantly balancing the precarious and ever-shifting needs of our staff, faculty, students, parents, and communities. We are expected to wade into crisis and solve problems—to be on the frontline, leading the organization through an endless series of challenges. We accept this responsibility, but all the while balance our own struggles and challenges inside and outside the workplace.

How can we prepare to meet a challenge we cannot yet define? How do we anticipate the answers before we even know the questions? What steps can we take to ready our team to face adversity in whatever form and on whatever field it chooses to engage us?

Conquering adversity can be a superhuman challenge—one that

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requires someone who can lead us through even the most harrowing circumstances. Here are six strategies that can make a difference:

**Strategy #1: Affirmation**—This starts with recognition of your bedrock values—those unshakable elements of your character that do not change with the wind. Heroes don't just stand *for* something, they stand *on* something—and that something is an unwavering set of principles and values that help them stand up when they've been knocked down. Affirmation knows who we are—at our core—before the bottom falls out so that when we need sure footing, it is there. Interestingly, what is true for ourselves is true for our organizations; not just what do we stand *for* but what do we stand *on* as a department, campus, or organization?

**Strategy #2: Expectation**—Life isn't fair, so don't expect it to be. The implied truth is that life does not adhere to a fairness standard—bad things do happen to good people. We are often faced with situations that are unjust, unfair, or untrue, but the reality of leadership is that even in the midst of these disappointments, we must still excel. It starts with the conscious decision to act rather than

lament. Avoid “*Why? Traps*”—those tormenting questions that beckon us to search for answers that simply are not there. Why something happened is less important than how are we going to deal with it now. Some questions need action, not answers, so put unfair situations behind you and move forward with what needs to be done.

**Strategy #3: Communication**—To be effective in overcoming adversity, we must be as comfortable speaking our hearts as we are speaking our minds. Communication is about timely sharing of what we feel, not just what we know. This is a difficult because we guard our emotions closely, especially in professional settings. Yet, the most effective leaders have an ability to connect personally with those they lead. Give people a plan, and they will follow it. Give them a vision, and they will move mountains. Senior leaders must accept that the productivity, effectiveness, and quality of work that we are responsible for is directly linked to the bonds we forge through communication with the people we lead.

**Strategy #4: Locomotion**—*In the struggle between stone and water, in time, the water wins.* This Chinese proverb captures the essence of the locomotion strategy—picture in your mind the Grand Canyon for visual validity of this wisdom. Purposeful motion is a powerful tool for reshaping our reality, especially in the face of adversity or crisis. Military pilots learn a phrase—*speed-is-life*—that teaches them to accelerate in an emergency. The reason is that the aircraft generally handles better at a faster airspeed so the pilot's margin for error increases. Essentially, they can make more

mistakes handling the crisis and still survive. It is a great lesson for leaders on the ground facing adversity. Locomotion also reminds us as leaders that imperfect action trumps perfect planning—it is almost always better to do *something*, than sit idle in a crisis. Stagnation breeds fear, action breeds solutions.

**Strategy #5: Collaboration—**

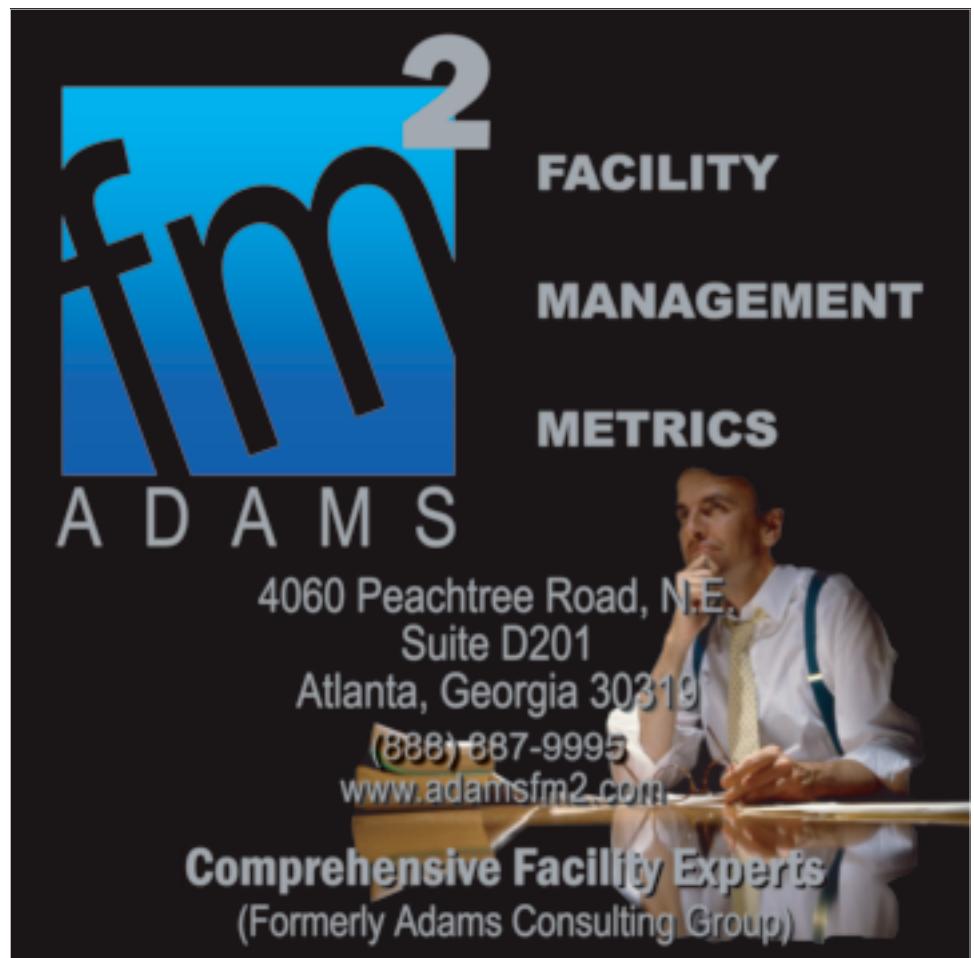
Conquering adversity is a team effort. Collaboration is about building a network of relationships *before* adversity strikes. You cannot build a shelter in a hurricane, so developing a strong circle of support *now* is critical. Who can you count on? What partnerships can you strengthen? People are willing to help when they know that help is both welcomed and appreciated. Take the time to develop working relationships with as many people as possible to build a healthy network of contacts.

**Strategy #6: Celebration—**

Even in the midst of serious adversity, there will be small victories—celebrate them. Celebration recharges our emotional batteries, strengthens the ties with our support team, and acknowledges progress no matter how modest. What have we already achieved? How far have we come? Find reasons to share a smile or a laugh, or to pass on a word of encouragement. Celebration is the rest stop we take on the long, often grueling, journey of leading our team through difficult times. If we are not watching, then we will miss a host of positive moments and the opportunity they present to reward, refresh, and recommit our team to the broader goals. In the midst of adversity, there is a hero inside each of us. As leaders, when we discover and unleash our own hero, we facilitate that process in those around us. And, not surprisingly, there is no adversity that a team of heroes cannot conquer. ¶

## Five Things You Can Do For Your Team

- 1. Anticipate adversity:** It's never a matter of if, only when, so prepare in advance and discuss various scenarios with your team. Remember, in a crisis, it's easier to adapt an existing plan than create one.
- 2. Provide resources:** Create a resource island in the workplace with books, articles, pictures, and commentary about overcoming adversity, challenge, or change. Challenge people to be continuous learners. Educate your team!
- 3. Build rapport:** "You cannot build shelter in a hurricane." Conquering adversity requires a team and teams are built long before they hit the field. Invest in teamwork training, invite other departments, and broaden your contact.
- 4. Celebrate small things:** More goodwill has been generated over a pizza lunch than all the formal recognition programs put together. There is no such thing as a small "thank you" so find reasons to post good news, to gather the team informally, or just make a big deal out of something special in someone's life.
- 5. Invite inspiration:** People need to be inspired and motivated from time to time so make it a priority. Invest in the internal fortitude of the team by engaging quality speakers, field trips, social gatherings, and a commitment to work-life balance.



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