

Reflections on Leadership in Troubled Waters

Craig Chappelow

It was, by anyone's definition, a crisis. It exploded on a warm July afternoon on the clear, blue waters of Lake Champlain in Vermont. Three friends had planned to spend the day water-skiing, fishing, eating, and generally enjoying one another's company. Gus was, among other things, an experienced angler with a knowledge of the lake and a track record of luring walleye from the deep, cold water. Linda was an accomplished water-skier. I was average at both activities, and was just happy to be outdoors taking advantage of Vermont's short summer.

Linda skied first, slaloming effortlessly behind the powerful boat we had borrowed from her boss. When it was Gus's turn to ski, Linda volunteered to drive, and I settled into one of the rear-facing seats to watch Gus. He stayed upright for a while, then tired and fell ungracefully into the boat's wake. I signaled to Linda, who cut back on the throttle and swung the boat around to give Gus another try. She pointed the bow toward him to start the question-mark-shaped maneuver that would loop the rope around to him. I was impressed. Not only was she a good skier but she also appeared to know her way around a boat.

As we slowed to make our approach toward Gus, the bow rose in response. Still facing backward, I sensed that we were moving too fast. Suddenly I heard Linda shout, "I can't see Gus!" Instinctively I reached over my shoulder and switched off the ignition, stopping the propeller almost immediately. It was too late. I saw Gus bobbing in our wake, and I felt the electric shock combination of adrenaline and terror course through me. I told Linda to start the engine and pull around to Gus so I could get him in the boat. I was too preoccupied with Gus's plight to notice that Linda was, by this time, falling apart. She turned the boat too sharply, causing me to lose my balance and fall to the deck. The boat passed directly over the now free-floating water ski, and the prop cut the ski cleanly in half. I got to my feet in time to see the ski bobbing past us, the two pieces held together by the rubber boot.

Keeping a Clear Head

At that instant I didn't know if Gus was dead or alive, injured or unhurt. What I did know—very clearly—was that everything was up to me now. Whatever happened would be based on how calm I remained and the quality of my decisions. I remember thinking that in some strange way, knowing this made it easier. I took the wheel of the boat. My

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hopes soared as we approached Gus and I saw him looking at us and waving. Then my spirits plummeted when I made out what he was saying: "I think it got my foot!" Linda and I managed to pull Gus into the boat, and I took a quick look at his foot before wrapping it tightly in a beach towel. I could see that the injury was serious, but he was not bleeding badly, and it could have been worse. Much worse.

Later that evening Gus told the story from his perspective. He had seen the bottom of the boat coming straight toward him and knew that Linda had lost sight of him under the bow. Using some quick thinking that may have saved his life, Gus flipped over and pushed hard off the bottom of the boat with his feet to try to escape the path of the prop. But his ski vest did what it was designed to do—it kept him afloat, making it impossible for him to submerge and preventing him from clearing the prop completely. The blades sliced the top of Gus's foot in three clean passes.

After we got Gus back in the boat, I rammed the throttle open and sped toward shore. We were about a half mile out when I suddenly realized that I had no idea where we were. Lake Champlain is

huge, and everything on shore looked the same to me—tiny buildings against the dark backdrop of the Green Mountains. Gus was the only one of us who knew the lake, and he was in partial shock and unable to help. For the first time I felt like panicking. Linda had regained control of herself, and she helped direct us to the dock. We put Gus in my car. Linda stayed behind to secure the boat and wait to meet Gus's wife, who had planned to meet us at the dock after work. I'm not sure why, but as Gus and I drove away I told Linda, "Whatever you do, don't tell her that we ran over Gus with the boat!"

As it turned out, Gus was OK. He required a lot of stitches but was treated and released from the hospital that evening.

Indelible Memories

As is the case for many people who experience a crisis, my thoughts drift back to this incident with surprising frequency, even though it happened almost twenty years ago. What could I have done differently? How could I have prevented the accident in the first place?

I looked at the incident through the lens of an organizational crisis management model developed by Hooshang Kuklan, a former professor of management at North Carolina Central University. In "Managing Crises: Challenges and Complexities," in the Autumn 1986 issue of the *SAM Advanced Management Journal*, he recommends six points for handling a crisis effectively:

1. *Resist denial.* In my own mind I denied nothing. We were in deep you-know-what, and I knew it. However, I found myself denying the seriousness of the problem to Linda and Gus. In an attempt to keep Linda from freaking out, I told her I was sure Gus was going to be all right. It didn't help. Trying to keep Gus from going into shock, I told him that his foot looked OK—even though I could see the stark-white metatarsal bones. It didn't help. Wanting to keep Gus's wife from panicking, I told Linda to lie to her. But when Gus's wife arrived at the dock, Linda used her own judgment and reported exactly what had happened. That helped.

2. *Adopt an aggressive approach.* I clearly did not follow this recommendation, at least at first. I allowed Linda to continue driving the boat even though it was obvious she had lost her self-control—as would almost anyone after such an accident.

3. *Seek relevant, effective decisions.* In the movie *Apollo 13*, flight director Gene Kranz (played by Ed Harris) tries to manage a crisis in space from

mission control on Earth. His first directive to his engineers is to "work the problem . . . don't make it worse by guessing." In the clutch of a crisis, a leader faces a dilemma: whether to trade quality decisions for quick ones. In the boat, consulting with Linda about the location of the dock was critical. I was tempted to drive anywhere fast, just so we would be moving. But I would have taken us off course if I had.

4. *Examine underlying assumptions.* In retrospect, I falsely assumed that Linda, because she is an excellent skier, was also skilled at handling a boat. I also assumed incorrectly that because it was her boss's boat, she was experienced at operating it.

5. *Emphasize prevention, detection, and early resolution.* Many organizations wait for a disaster to happen before developing a crisis management plan. It didn't occur to me to plan for any problems on what was supposed to be a relaxing afternoon. If there was a first-aid kit in the boat, I didn't know where it was. Also, there was a Coast Guard station on the lake. It might have been better if I had taken Gus there instead of to the dock—particularly if he had been more seriously injured.

6. *Use postcrisis self-examination.* Gus wisely invited Linda and me to his home that evening to, as he put it, "have a beer and talk about what happened." That was about the last thing I wanted to do. As it turned out, it was exactly the right thing to do. We sat on Gus's deck, and each of us said what he or she had to say. As you might imagine, the conversation started with a lot of apologies, progressed to "we should have . . .," and concluded with agreement that we were extremely lucky and would approach things differently for the rest of our lives as a result of what happened.

A Great Escape

It was, by anyone's definition, a crisis, and it changed the consciousness of three people. I like to think we escaped. We escaped major injury to Gus, and we also escaped from the naiveté that leads to ineffective crisis management. I find myself better prepared nowadays. Facing the minor crises my wife and I encounter regularly as we raise three young, active sons, I react better as a result of what I learned. Gus, Linda, and I have lost touch with each other, but I will never lose touch with the lessons of that day.

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