

# The Luxury of Tough Times: Five Terrific Questions

Keir Carroll

Few people would claim that *tough times*—times of great upheaval, economic or otherwise—are better (or better for us) than *good times*. Who, after all, would disagree with British author Kingsley Amis’s classic understatement: “There was no end to the ways in which nice things are nicer than nasty ones.” Or with the great singer and comedian Sophie Tucker’s emphatic assertion: “I’ve been rich and I’ve been poor. Believe me, honey, rich is better.”

But I would make the claim that tough times—times when great change and anxiety often freeze us in suspended animation—can provide a certain luxury: the luxury of reflection and insight.

In good times it is easy to whirl around in the blender of daily life in blameless busyness, staying a step ahead of the blades, in the puree, in a frenzy of doing, doing, doing. We pack our days with e-mail wars and worthless meetings, constantly responding to low-value requests in order to stave off sneer pressure and constantly complaining that we never have enough time to think, reflect, or plan. Anyone who cries out, “Stop the madness!” is branded a troublemaker. Anyone who says, “Don’t just do something—sit there!” is labeled a lunatic. Anyone caught staring at the ceiling, reflecting on what *has*

been and what *needs to be*, is simply a slacker.

It is much more comfortable living down in the blender than up in the helicopter. Spinning around with everyone else is a form of mass hysteria after all—we agree to believe that we are doing the right things

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together. We may be exhausted but we are exhausted together. We may be frustrated but we are frustrated together. We may be angry but we are angry together. And when we succeed, if we have time, we can celebrate together.

Tough times, in contrast, can boot us out of the blender and into the helicopter. The stomach lurches, the heart pounds, and we are terrified and exhilarated all at one time. We are smacked awake. Up in the helicopter, above the whirling and whimpering, we are granted the luxury of confronting the tough questions we know we

really should have been asking when times were good.

It’s lonely up there. We lose the comfort of busyness. Instead, our primary job is to see life steady and see it whole: to assess paths taken and not taken and catalogue our organization’s and our own sins of omission and commission, the weaknesses, blind spots, follies, and fears that are too uncomfortable to face let alone name out loud. It’s hard work. It can feel overwhelming. But it is noble work, and it is indispensable for future success.

Usually it takes a near-death experience to jolt us into facing the big questions—questions like *Who am I? What do I stand for? How do I want to be remembered?* Talk to anyone who has struggled—often in a hospital bed—through the dark night of the soul and emerged into the sunshine, and what will often strike you is his or her renewed zest for life, serenity, solidity, and ability to look reality straight in the eye.

These individuals see themselves not as being cursed with a catastrophe but as being blessed with a priceless opportunity: the opportunity to put themselves in perspective.

## FINDING HIMSELF

Here’s a case in point: Robert from Scotland, a workaholic; task-addicted and hard-driving; the embodiment of the ambitious, up-and-coming manager; fired with adrenaline; neglectful of his young family. His heart attack at a ludi-

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*Editor’s note: Issues & Observations is a venue for CCL staff members and associates to express their personal views about leadership.*

crously young age propelled him on a six-month journey of self-discovery. He brought what he discovered back to his team. His discovery was in many ways mundane: “I am a person,” he said in his fierce and almost impenetrable Scottish accent, “who cares about achieving superlative results and cares about being with the people I love, and the two need not be mutually exclusive.” He and his team became ruthless in uncluttering their work lives. If a task was merely urgent but unimportant to the present or future success of the business, it was kicked off the list. If a meeting was merely a ritual blamestorming session, it was kicked off the calendar. If it was five thirty, then it was time to go home. Period.

The result? Clarity of purpose. Focus. Results! Energy and passion and a life lived not on the fringes of BlackBerrying but in joyful bites. What courage it took to insist on doing only important work! Talking with Robert was humbling. Hearing others talk *about* Robert was inspiring.

Tough times simulate that opportunity. We can choose to hunker in the bunker, terrified to take any action for fear of making a mistake, cc-ing the world to cover our rear ends. We can choose to redouble our efforts, doing the same things over and over again in the vain hope that we will get different results. Or we can choose to see this time as an opportunity to take stock, get clear on what matters and what doesn't, and find the wellspring of strength necessary to create or profit from the good times again.

## ASKING OURSELVES

So in tough times, there are five terrific questions we can ask. The first is *What are we all about?* In other words, do we have a core or are we all mirror? What are the values we have been living, not merely espousing? Are we like those Wall Street giants whose lived values seem to

have been “line my pockets and stay out of jail”? Have our choices been selfish and expedient, or have we struggled to mean something through our actions? Wherever we are in the organization, what code or principles do we try to embody?

Sometimes those principles are lofty indeed. Sometimes they are earthy. A great favorite of mine came from a senior executive of a multinational insurance company in his address to managers during a

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workshop: “If you're not developing people and you're not having fun, then all you have left is—good grief!—*insurance!*”

The second terrific question: *How have we thought of ourselves as leaders?* Put in other terms, have we subscribed to the *big brain theory*, jealously keeping to ourselves the right to think and experiment and decide what needs to be done? Or have we been quick to involve the intelligence and imagination and vigor of those around us? In the best of times these are hard questions because they oblige us to test our *actions* (do we actually adopt

opposing ideas?) against our *lip service* (we know it's important to listen!). What about now, in what feels like the worst of times? Tough times tempt us to retrench, batten down the hatches, and fear losing control over circumstances—and thus to shut out and shut down the very people whose energy and commitment we most need. Tough times, then, test our honesty: Are we living the leadership legend we believe we are?

The third terrific question: *How have we thought of our followers?* Take Sally, a wonderful manager, highly respected, quickly promoted, a star. Her philosophy: “People are grown-ups. Not all of them realize it. My job is to help them realize it.” When she took over management of a struggling team, she sat down once a week with each team member individually and asked him or her—very gently—four questions:

1. What's going well?
2. What's not going well?
3. What are you doing about what's not going well?
4. What support do you need from me?

At first, the meetings were very brief. It took time for trust to develop. Then, suddenly, the meetings seemed to take forever as individuals not only unburdened themselves of their workplace frustrations but also gloried in the challenge of imagining solutions. After a surprisingly short time, the meetings were very brief again as people realized they had been licensed by the third question to think for themselves, reach out to teammates, and take responsibility for solving their own problems. As a result, the team became close-knit, high-performing, self-reliant, and proud of its successes.

Now, in tough times, Sally has a real dilemma. Is her job to protect her team from harsh realities, to give them, like a caring parent, reassuring and optimistic answers to their fearful questions? Or does she come clean, confess her own uncertainty

and insecurity, and invite them to join her in working through unpredictable difficulties toward uncertain success? In other words, are they grown-up *enough* yet?

Sally is smart and emotionally acute. There is no doubt she will figure out where on the spectrum from extreme optimism to utter pessimism she needs to be to keep her team ready for the good times to come. The point is that she is asking herself the right questions and knows her team well enough to make a smart choice.

The fourth terrific question: *How are we building the team of the future?* When good times return, will we be ready for them? Will we have the right people in place, with the right skills and spirit so that we are already on the starting blocks, ready to leave our competition in the dust?

This is a tough set of questions even in good times. Organizations love to make people repeat themselves. My own work history provides a case in point. In the early 1980s, despite ludicrous odds, my team at an eminent Harvard University-affiliated teaching hospital had managed to pull off a special project without authority, budget, clout, or willing cooperation from powerful forces. Another similar effort was on the horizon, and naturally, the organization came to me, eager to have me repeat the success. And I, of course, was eager to prove that the first project had not been merely a fluke and that I was, in fact, much smarter than I looked. Luckily, Art Stomberg, the hospital's vice president of planning and my mentor and boss, warned me off. "Look," he said, shaking his head like a puzzled bear. "Why do you think I sent *you* over to MIT to work on that task force? Why do you think I had *you* do all the presentations in the auditorium in front of those ugly, angry mobs? Why did I send *you* to represent us at those conventions? Why am I having *you* help me reallocate the million or

so square feet of space we now have? Not so you could repeat yourself! No! I did it all so you'd be ready for bigger and better things!"

And of course, he was right. An untutored genius when it came to mentoring, Stomberg dedicated himself to building talent for the future. When you worked for him, he gave you opportunities to sample the tasks necessary for the next stage in your career. His daily question—"So when

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are you leaving?!"—was a constant reminder to look forward and be ready.

In tough times, the temptation to do the opposite is overwhelming. Case in point: a favorite client reports that her boss is no longer her boss. No, she's been asked to go back to her previous role and make the unit shipshape again. And her boss's boss has been asked to go back and tidy up *her* old unit too. Neither one of them will be doing anything new. They will be learning nothing new. They will be bored out of their minds.

And those in the units right now, looking to stretch and learn? They are blocked, denied a stimulating challenge, and likewise condemned to repetition. It's what a colleague of mine calls a WOMBAT: a waste of money, brains, and talent.

The fifth and final terrific question: *What will be our legacy?* In other words, what is the future we want to look back on? Few of us will have the legacy of Christopher

Wren, architect of London's St. Paul's Cathedral, where he is buried. A plain plaque in Latin reads, more or less, "If you are seeking a monument to his memory, just look around you." At the other extreme, there is the wonderfully sardonic *New Yorker* cartoon showing a stoop-shouldered elderly widow, bedraggled bouquet in hand, staring at her husband's simple epitaph: "He watched sports." It's quite a spectrum.

When we are clinging to the side of the planet by our fingernails, waiting for the next round of layoffs, our legacy is probably the last thing on our minds. Instead we are seduced into the thickets of politicking and rumor-hunting. Or we are frozen by anxiety. Or we are hounded by self-doubt. Or we wrap ourselves in a cloak of magical thinking.

What if, instead, we were to ask ourselves, "What small action can we take today that will build a glorious future for the organization?"

Sometimes the answers are fiendishly difficult to come by. Sometimes the answers are humble or obvious: perhaps we could go talent hunting *now* so that we have the best-in-the-business bench when the world turns; perhaps we could sniff out complementary start-up businesses *now* so that we are ready to scoop them up when we have the cash; maybe we could start sounding like a global company, with our staff learning a new language *now*.

Perhaps these ideas do not sound grandiose enough. But what they really represent is a way of thinking: the habit of looking for concrete things to do *now* to be ready for the future. Typically, these things are *not* urgent, *not* on the to-do list, *not* assigned to us. They are the smart moves that occasionally cross our minds but get lost or neglected in the daily whirl of the good-times blender. Tough times provide the perfect opportunity to start building legacies,

*Continued on page 24*

around the open holes filled with water were a safety hazard, but I took no further action. I left the camp, but when I returned after a week I found that a child had drowned in one of the holes. Learning how to serve reminds us of our humanity—not just the valued qualities such as compassion, patience, and forgiveness but also the frustration, indifference, and cynicism that reveal our frailty and threaten to alienate us from our mission.

In learning how to serve we also face challenges and change within our organizations. At times leaders can enter public service to dedicate themselves to a mission only to find that the mission lacks political support and funding. When this happens, the mission becomes a victim of uncertainty. In an atmosphere of lack of recognition and compensation for a mission, leaders can manifest behaviors ranging from malaise to unleashed frustration. The public is not served.

How can leaders transcend ambivalence and alienation when faced with conditions that threaten their mission? Viktor Frankl, the Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist whose book *Man's Search for Meaning* (Washington Square Press, 1984) had sold ten million copies in twenty-four languages at the time of his death in

1997, offers the insight that “success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one’s personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as a byproduct of one’s surrender to a person other than oneself.”

Frank Waters, author of *The Man Who Killed the Deer* (Ohio University Press, 1942), a book about Pueblo Indian life, offers further guidance. He wrote, “It is a deep truth and difficult to learn that the greatest deeds must be done by him who is content to remain unknown lest his actions be impeded by too ready acclaim.”

The poet Paolo Lugari adds the thought that “yes it is impossible; therefore it will take a little longer.”

## THE WORK OF SERVICE

The act of acknowledging and embracing learning and continuing in public service is a commitment. It is in this grounded place of commitment that public service truly becomes the work of service. Public service as the work of service allows each leader in each moment to have the potential to accomplish the mission in a consistent and meaningful way that is not subject to variables such as budget or political will. In this place leaders can

choose to translate the work of public service to the work of service by extending trust, demonstrating deference, exercising flexibility, and offering patience to those they serve.

Trust is the starting point in working with others to build capability. Deference forms the foundation of successful diplomacy between governments and people. Flexibility opens the door to respecting the ways of others. Patience acknowledges that the concept of time is relative to a group’s cultural existence. These characteristics are not inherent in most organizations. But it is through the accumulation of these actions that organizations can emerge at a place of higher service.

Within this context, it is not an organization’s policies or political or religious ideologies that define service. Instead, there is simply individual choice on the part of leaders to manifest public service as the work of service to others, and in so doing, to redefine public service. ✍

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# The Luxury of Tough Times: Five Terrific Questions

*Continued from page 22*

while others are immobilized by fear or suspense.

Lasting legacies need not be tangible, of course. On the contrary, it is often the intangible legacies that endure—not monuments but mind-sets. When we think of the great companies, isn’t it often their passionate mind-sets that impress us? They live by their mantras: abhor waste, respond to every problem by

sundown, guarantee lifetime satisfaction or your money back, and love your customers. Each mantra is someone’s monument; it did not spring from nowhere.

## JUST IN TIME

Remember Robert, the Scottish manager who discovered that it was possible to get spectacular results at work and have a family life too? Here’s another thing he said: “Why didn’t I have the

brains to ask myself the important questions until it was almost too late?”

Well, Robert, it’s because you’re only human. Better late than never. ✍

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