

The ablest navigators

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GUEST COLUMNIST

THE 18TH Century historian and British Parliamentarian Edward Gibbon provides one of the deepest insights into leadership success, almost in passing, as he describes an encounter between Christian crusaders and Ottoman Turks in **The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire**.

"In the Christian squadron, five stout and lofty ships were guided by skilful pilots, and manned with the veterans of Italy and Greece, long practiced in the arts and perils of the sea," he wrote.

"Their weight was directed to sink or scatter the weak obstacles that impeded their passage; their artillery swept the waters; their liquid fire was poured on the heads of their adversaries, who, with the design of boarding, presumed to approach them; and the winds and waves are always on the side of the ablest navigators."

The account may be read as an allegory for organisational leadership. He did not say the pilots were new and inexperienced, he did not say they turned around when they saw the obstacles, and most importantly, he did not offer that the winds and waves were not in their favour. Rather, for the best leaders, the winds and waves are always on their side. This is not to say

that the winds and waves are always favourable, but to say that able leaders know how to turn difficult circumstances to their advantage.

Let me introduce you to Mr X Plain, though you may know him already. X is the boy who blamed the stones on the field when he mis-kicked a ball; he would have said he lost the 100m dash because there was a headwind (in his lane only); or his cricket team lost because the ball was soft, though both teams played with the same ball.

X Plain never really became good at anything, proving the truth again of Benjamin Franklin's words: "He that is good for making excuses is seldom good for anything else."

X Plain is destined to rue in his later years with the words of Paul Sartre: "Circumstances have been against me, I was worthy to be something much better than I have been."

His friend, X Cell, would have made the adjustment on the stony field to be more aware of the bounce of the ball, he would have taken responsibility for losing the race and committed to training harder, he would be more cautious as a batsman; always looking, learning, adjusting, innovating, never blaming.

ECONOMICS OF CHALLENGE

You have sat in meetings with an adult X Plain. He cannot resist the temptation to expound on the circumstances which led to his missing his targets, or failing to deliver on a project task. He does so in great detail, presenting sophisticated arguments, spurious to the point of being believable and expertly soliciting sympathy.



This is a teachable moment for transformative leadership.

X Cell, who is now CEO of the company, either subtly or forcibly, depending on style, asks for an end to the 'long story' and uses the moment to instruct the group.

What he is interested in as leader is results. He will do his best to support you in solving problems and overcoming obstacles, but at the end of the day, success is not built on recognition of challenges, it is built on overcoming them.

As baseball pitcher, Johnny Sain put it: "The world doesn't want to hear about the labour pains. They just want to see the baby."

Every challenge is an opportunity to differentiate yourself from your competitors. To the extent that you succeed where your competitors fail, or find solutions where your competitors have none, then you strengthen your position in the market, fortify your competitive advantage and set yourself up for

supernormal profits. Arie de Geus, past vice-president of strategy at Royal Dutch Shell, said it well: "The ability to learn faster than your competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage."

The business reverberations of the challenge / excuse or challenge / success alternate pathways is, put succinctly by John Maxwell, in his book **The 360 Degree Leader**, "It is easier to move from failure to success than it is from excuses to success."

Challenge is a filter. It separates the ordinary from the good from the extraordinary. The single greatest threat to overcoming challenge is the propensity to offer an excuse as to why it cannot be overcome. As if that makes it okay.

Worse yet is to believe that excuse yourself. That only loosens your resolve and turns off your mind's subconscious ability to solve problems. The mind needs tension to come up with creative solutions. Excuses slacken that tension.

Leading businesses welcome challenges because while their competitors are offering excuses to investors as to why those challenges could not be overcome, they are busy overcoming them, achieving their mission, and creating value. To the extent that you can purge your organisation of the culture of excuses and engender a culture of solutions, you will be a good leader and an able navigator.

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