

Never Run Out of Altitude, Airspeed, and Ideas at the Same Time

Among those whom I like or admire, I can find no common denominator, but among those whom I love, I can: All of them make me laugh.

W. H. Auden

A sense of control over our destinies defines one of the most basic of human needs. When we feel in control of a situation, we feel empowered and focused. When we don't, we get discouraged, and in the worst-case scenario, we start to feel like victims or aggressors. Since most people spend the majority of their waking hours at work, it stands to reason that they look for many of their psychological needs to be met there. When people don't feel in control at work, they become frustrated and unhappy, a surefire recipe for departure. However, when they feel empowered and appreciated, they tend to stay. Humor and laughter help.

Often bosses can't control significant things at work. In fact, they probably don't hold sway over most things, but they can control their own *reactions* to unfortunate events. No matter what happens to us, no one else can tell us what to feel about it, and certainly no one can control what we laugh at. When you realize you have power over how you respond, you have taken the first step in helping direct reports feel authority over *their* reactions to unpleasant and unexpected changes.

When hard times rear their ugly heads, bosses have to be the heroes, the rescuers who look after others and help them keep from losing their perspective and their coping resources. But they can only do this if they have addressed their own reactions, especially when change comes more by imposition than invitation. Like accomplished, safe pilots, bosses need to maintain altitude, airspeed, and ideas, the three main ingredients in the formula for helping others respond to and overcome adversity.

Altitude

Psychologists tell us that human beings want power and authority over their futures. We want to feel that we have a say in how things will go for us. When we perceive that our actions will make an outcome likely, we feel optimistic and secure. When we don't, we feel insecure. We feel like victims. Sometimes people stay in a victim's frame of mind after a loss or disappointment. They doubt their capacity to make their lives happen according to their own aspirations, so they wait to be rescued or blessed by good fortune. They start to feel undermined and overwhelmed, and they can become totally immobilized.

In a physical sense, altitude relates to the elevation of an object above a certain level, usually the earth. Therefore, "altitude" as it applies to leadership, involves a global perspective, a realization that a bigger picture exists, and no one person is the center of

the universe. When bosses indicate that they have altitude, they usually exhibit these behaviors:

- Vision—an ability to see the future and to anticipate consequences.
- Critical thinking—the capability to go into uncharted territory. Managers have the ability to do the right thing well; leaders have the ability to figure out what the right thing is.
- The ability to prioritize, to do first things first and to separate important from unimportant uses of time.
- The motivation to look beyond the obvious.
- The skills to paint credible pictures of possibilities.
- An eagerness to create competitive strategies.

The fear of making mistakes often compromises our altitude. We imagine dire consequences instead of objectively seeing mistakes as setbacks, not disasters. Most people know Thomas Edison invented the light bulb, but many are shocked to find that he tried thousands of times before he perfected the combination that would work. Legend holds that he wrote in the margins of his notebooks, “Remember Jonah—he came out all right.” If this sort of humor worked for a famous inventor like Edison, imagine how it can help you and your team maintain their global perspective, even during setbacks. If, as the boss, you can laugh at your own mistakes, you’ll probably be more tolerant of those of others. During times of adversity, there is much we can’t control, but our global perspective, our altitude, is one thing we can take charge of. Sometimes humor helps with that, but looking out for each other almost always does.

Airspeed

When we think of airspeed, we think of velocity and the forces that make us go forward. Countless studies indicate that getting the job done describes only part of the boss’s job; building relationships to keep the right people doing the job is the other part of it. Relationships provide one of the main sources of fuel that helps successful bosses accelerate their productivity and that of others. The boss who avoids running out of airspeed tends to have these traits:

- A knack for building relationships
- A good sense of humor
- A strong motivation to follow through
- A willingness and availability to listen
- A genuine interest in people

- The capacity to convey respect for people and their ideas
- The confidence to tell people what they need to know, not just what they want to hear.

As a species, we realize we depend on one another, but we can also get on each other's nerves. Some research suggests humor and laughter developed in early humans as a way of establishing and smoothing out social relationships. As we have learned through the centuries, used appropriately, laughter unites us and reduces friction among us. As Victor Borge said, "Laughter is the shortest distance between two people."

Hating someone who makes you laugh is almost impossible. Whatever foibles and irritants they bring to the table, if they make us laugh, we tend to want to be around them. Ronald Reagan was one of the most loved presidents in history. Why? He made people laugh. Certainly many criticized his policies, but his approval rating remained high during his tenure and far beyond.

Relationships, communication, closeness, and humor, all fuel us and provide the airspeed that keeps us going through adversity and enables us help others. Communicating with those that we care about or who rely on us allows us to keep this perspective. Altitude and airspeed are two critical elements for any boss's success, but there's one more: Ideas

Ideas

Creative problem solving is probably one of the most essential talents a leader can possess. Bosses who can look at diverse information and see relationships, who can reason abstractly and make logical connections, and who can think of the future as open and malleable bring an invaluable asset to their organizations: ideas. When leaders have ideas, they can solve unfamiliar problems and make decisions that are in the best interest of their direct reports and the organization, skills that are tied to the following:

- An openness to brainstorming and creativity
- The motivation and enthusiasm to challenge existing processes
- A knack for inviting input from a variety of perspectives
- A willingness to experiment with novel approaches and champion innovation

Having ideas makes us mentally flexible, which in turns equips us to see things from several perspectives, tolerate uncertainty, adapt to change, and solve problems in new ways. When people don't value flexibility, tragic things happen. Think of the tragedies of history. Look at the Greek tragedies, the Shakespearean tragedies, and the Sopranos—all tragic because people were inflexible. Tony Soprano's default position was to "whack" someone. Had he been willing to entertain more ideas, to see things

from others' perspectives and to play with ideas, many lives could have been saved. The series might not have enjoyed a shorter run, however.

Ideas are certainly critical for leaders, but leadership is not only about position, experience, knowledge, and education. It's also about the willingness to experiment with possibilities to help solve problems that no one has encountered before. Humor can help. Humor fosters mental flexibility because it blocks the negative emotions of fear and anger that cause us to act rigidly. When we "play" with ideas we unleash creative problem solving and develop a new way of looking at things. Many have said humor is tragedy plus time. When we look back, we can laugh at something that happened. Why wait? If you're going to laugh about the situation some day, try out that perspective sooner rather than later.

Conclusion

Many of us grew up with admonishments *not* to let humor help us with our altitude, airspeed, and ideas: "Wipe that smile off your face" and "Get serious." Bad advice then, worse now. Leave the smile on your face, and take yourself less seriously. Unless you are an FBI agent or police officer, chances are no one will shoot at you at work, and unless plan to take up brain surgery, chances are your mistakes won't be fatal to anyone either. Work on a humor perspective. If you have to run out of altitude, airspeed, or ideas, try not to do any two at the same time. Take your problems seriously but yourself lightly.

Even though many discouraged us from developing the very skills that will help us now, it's not too late. Humor within oneself and with others allows for taking control of a senseless situation and for coping with unexpected or unwelcome changes to our worlds. As the boss, you have the responsibility for taking care of yourself during times of change so you can help others; you need to put on your own oxygen masks before you can help anyone else with theirs.