

# Leadership Lessons for Stormy Seas

Five simple rules to weather a perfect storm with disruptive squalls gathering on multiple fronts: societal, technological, economic, and political. **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**

Over the last decade, captains of institution and industry have had to steer their ships through increasingly Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous seas. During the upcoming year, however, these captains will find themselves heading into a perfect storm where their navigation skills will be tested at a whole new level.

On the horizon, disruptive squalls are gathering on multiple fronts. On the societal front, the Syrian refugee crisis is displacing millions of people into neighboring countries. On the technological front, the vulnerability of institutional IT systems has yet again been exposed by the Panama Paper scandal. On the economic front, a referendum on Britain's exit from the European Union is to be decided upon in June. And on the political front, a Trump presidency remains a possibility long after conventional wisdom suggested his political star would fade.

How prepared are our institutional and industry captains to navigate this perfect disruptive storm and what can they learn from the experience of those who have effectively navigated stormy seas in times past?

For centuries, experienced captains have followed five simple rules in preparing to navigate a perfect storm:

**1. Find True North.** Experienced captains begin by finding true north, and during the most trying of times, they maintain focus on that bright light in the sky as it guides their most critical decisions. In an organizational context, finding true north is analogous to “connecting to purpose.” The challenge our modern-day captains must confront is: *“How do I convey our organization's collective purpose in a way that viscerally engages the hearts, heads, and hands of our people and guides every decision they make?”*

**2. Chart the Course.** In charting the course, experienced captains explore and evaluate multiple potential navigation paths. Then an initial course is set with the clear recognition that it will be altered during the changing circumstances brought

on by the storm. In an organizational context, charting the course is analogous to “creating strategic agility.” The challenge our modern-day captains must confront is: *“How do I communicate a clear and compelling direction around our collective aspiration as an organization, and how do I cultivate the ability to continuously adjust and adapt strategic direction based on changing circumstances?”*

**3. Stay Shipshape.** In navigating the open seas—both stormy and calm—experienced captains focus on ensuring that everything remains shipshape. Daily drills are carried out to ensure that the crew practices their respective roles and responsibilities until they become second nature. In an organizational context, staying shipshape is analogous to “work routines and practices.” The challenge our modern-day captains must confront is: *“How do I implement work routines and practices that enable the organization to rapidly respond to uncertainty with competence and confidence?”*

**4. Focus on the Horizon.** Experienced captains have learned that maintaining a steady hand on the helm and a clear, uninterrupted focus on the horizon can be the difference between life and death in navigating the perfect storm. In an organizational context, focusing on the horizon is analogous to “focusing on strategic outcomes.” The challenge our modern-day captains must confront is: *“How do I keep the organization focused on the strategic outcomes that matter most in creating sustainable competitive advantage for our business?”*

**5. Cultivate Camaraderie.** Experienced captains recognize the importance of building and maintaining trusted relationships both on and off the ship. In an organizational context, cultivating camaraderie is defined as “working the relationship network.” The challenge our modern-day leaders must confront is: *“How do I work the network inside and outside my organization to ensure that we have the resilience of relationships required to deal with any eventuality?”*

The perfect storm is coming. Are you ready? **T**



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