

# DEADLY DON'TS

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**T**HERE'S AN ANCIENT CHINESE SAYING that I bet you've heard before: *May you live to see interesting times. Today, this saying is used in a variety of ways, but rarely in its true context. Why? Because it's not the blessing so many people incorrectly assume. Quite the contrary. In fact, the saying was actually meant as a curse. Apparently, the Chinese believed that 'interesting times' were times full of turmoil, tension, and bad omens. So if somebody has ever repeated those words to you, keep in mind that they weren't telling you to have a good day.*

Regardless, whether this saying is a blessing or a curse, are 'gathering clouds and raging storms' in our future. Those congratulate yourself – because you made it. We do live in interesting times. In fact I think we live in extraordinary times. And whether you want to admit it or not, the times where we find ourselves today are indeed full of turmoil, tension and bad omens. All you have to do is read the paper or watch the news to see that this statement is a fact. It's almost as if there is a daily dose of bad news, a regular reminder that we live in interesting times and an additional stressor to our already stressful lives. Whether it is the economic crisis, rising unemployment and layoffs, business bankruptcies and failures, global warming and climate change, or just generalized portents of doom and gloom, there appears to be a strange confluence of events, predictions, prophecies and emotions that all seem to be reaching a synergistic peak in our times. In fact, President Barack Obama – in his inaugural speech – remarked that there

Consider these behaviors to be the *Five Deadly Don'ts* you should avoid when you find yourself under increasing levels of pressure

in organizational life (or even personal life). Individually or collectively, if you do a Don't, they can destroy relationships, teams, and even entire organizations by creating toxic environments that are filled with distrust, stress, and despair. In this situation, everybody loses. I've seen it happen.

So that it doesn't happen to you and your organization in these challenging times, let's review the Five Deadly Don'ts to avoid when the pressure cooker starts boiling.

### 1. Don't Become Reactive

I like to tell my clients that it is impossible to have your eyes on the horizon when your head is in a foxhole. Or, said differently: it's impossible to think strategically when you are constantly reacting to the things that are happening around you. When we are under increasing levels of pressure, it's tempting to dig the proverbial foxhole, hunker down and tell ourselves that this too shall pass. Like the soldier in that foxhole, the only time we show ourselves is when we rise to fight back attackers or to mount attacks of our own. Regardless, you are still reacting to what is happening around you, with no clear plan for how you intend to get out of the foxhole in the first place.



This is what I call headline management: constantly running to and fro to put out 'fires' and not stopping long enough to remind ourselves why we exist, for whom, in order to accomplish what. Keep in mind, when we lose sight of our true purpose (because we are constantly reacting to events around us), people become confused and disoriented. As people become confused and disoriented, they become inefficient and unproductive. As people become inefficient and unproductive, they become angry and disagreeable. Finally, when people become angry and disagreeable, the environment becomes toxic and everybody loses.

You know you are working in a reactive environment when everybody seems to be working like bees, but nothing is getting done. Keep an eye out for this key indicator.

### 2. Don't Become Protective

"Don't cut here, cut there." "I've already cut to the bone, look somewhere else for your savings." "We provide critical services; they provide discretionary services, cut them first." Ever heard these words in your organization? If so, watch out, because your organization is falling into the trap of silo thinking!

Silo thinking is a dysfunctional byproduct of specialization of labor. Organizations have to structure themselves functionally by major divisions and sections (such as IT, Human Resources, Operations, Manufacturing, Marketing, etc.) in order to get the work done. This is necessary and natural. But the trap and the challenge is to avoid the temptation to think that the whole world revolves around your silo and your little piece of the organization; this is called silo thinking. Silo thinking is seductive even in good times, but when organizations become

squeezed by tremendous outside pressure, it can become profoundly destructive, where functional groups compete with each other, rapidly spiraling into a destructive game of tit-for-tat where everybody loses.

We need look no further than the failure of Enron to see the incredibly destructive power of competition between functional groups with shared missions. According to the *New York Times*, Enron, which was a company that had once prided itself on its intense team spirit, "eventually became a place with such an intensely competitive atmosphere that people often did not feel secure enough in their jobs to question irregularities, if they were aware of them at all." People shut down and retreated into their competitive silos, and it became an everyone-for-themselves' environment. You all remember how this story ends.

### 3. Don't Become Defensive

Have you ever sent an email that you regretted? You know, one of those emails where you completely and thoroughly (and according to you, accurately) critiqued the behavior or performance of another person or group? How did it work? I'll bet your dwindling salary that it didn't achieve your desired results; in fact, I'll bet it caused a tremendous backlash, where the object of your criticism leveled a counter-attack against you and your services. And where did it go from there? It very likely spiraled into a vicious and destructive game of finger-pointing as each party vigorously defended themselves. (I'm convinced that email has become electronic road-rage in a pressure-cooker world.)



In organizational life and in life in general, when we become defensive we become emotional; and when we become emotional, our capacity to think critically evaporates. Why is this dangerous? Because in extraordinary times – times just like where we find ourselves right now – we have to retain our ability to

think rationally and critically, to make non-defensive decisions by setting emotions aside. This is extremely difficult, but vital, if your organization is going to survive in these challenging times. Always remember the famous story about George Washington: when a destitute friend came to him begging for a job, he said, "As your friend I would do anything for you. As you president, I can do nothing for you." It is important that we set aside emotions in order to make the difficult decisions that are before us today.

#### 4. Don't Become Political

This is the "meeting behind the meeting," and in my experience working with and around organizations for more than 25 years, it's the most destructive of the Five Deadly Don'ts.

I like to say that politics exists in levels. At the top is what I call classic politics, which is the democratic structure of competing interests each vying for a voice in public policy. This is the way our system of governance was designed, and for the most part it works. However, as you go down the hierarchy of political maneuvering, from classic politics to inter-governmental politics, to inter-departmental politics, to inter-group politics and so on, you finally arrive at the bottom of the pile – petty politics.



This is that nasty and toxic game of personal character attack: well I agree but that's not what he said –isms, rolling peers under the bus for our mistakes, back-of-room whisper meetings, sabotage, and so on. I can't tell you how many times I've heard a manager in a meeting say, "John, I could have told you that effort was going to fail. It was doomed from the start." To which I reply, "Then why didn't you?" In a game of petty politics, toxic people want to see their peers fail. In this environment, everyone loses.

If someone in your organization is playing petty political games, get rid of him or her right now. If for some reason you can't remove them, marginalize them; eliminate their ability to infect the organization further. I can't stress this enough. A petty political player is like a mutating cancer, and they will eventually infect the entire organization.

#### 5. Don't Become Withdrawn and Secretive

I was recently on a commercial flight from Las Vegas to Austin. About 10 minutes after takeoff, the pilots made a sudden and abrupt right turn, and began a steep and breathtaking dive back to the airport. It was one of the most frightening experiences of my life, and was dramatically exacerbated by the fact that nobody – and I mean nobody – was talking to

the passengers. The pilots didn't say a word and the flight attendants were nowhere to be seen. Just before we landed a flight attendant screamed (in a panicked voice) that we were making an emergency landing. Gee, thanks.

A few minutes later, our plane was being assaulted by firefighters as they surrounded us on the ground. All the passengers were watching this happen, each lost in his or her own doomsday scenario. Nobody talked to us. By this time passengers were crying.



Long story short, we made it out alive. But – and here is the point of this short story – every passenger that got off that plane that day was busy, nervous, and under pressure (I'm sure those pilots were nervous and under pressure). But keep this in mind: in the absence of information and regular communication during extraordinary times and events, people will fill in the gaps on their own – write their own script, if you will – and that script will not just be wrong, but oftentimes it will be hostile to you and the organization.

During extraordinary times, it is tempting to become withdrawn and secretive. We stop talking to each other because we are busy, nervous, and under pressure (I'm sure those pilots were busy, nervous and under pressure). But keep this in mind: in the absence of information and regular communication during extraordinary times and events, people will fill in the gaps on their own – write their own script, if you will – and that script will not just be wrong, but oftentimes it will be hostile to you and the organization.

It's tempting when we are under tremendous pressure to withdraw and become secretive. But know this: if you aren't talking to your organization – continuous, honest dialogue – you are slowly turning them against you.

#### Conclusion

As you reflect on the Five Deadly Don'ts, keep in mind the ancient Zen proverb: *That which you are seeking, is always seeking you.* This proverb is, in my opinion, a beautiful salutation to human capability and inventiveness, and communicates that if you hold to a vision, you can make that vision a reality. It also communicates that your future is in many ways a choice; that you are a co-creator in your destiny, that it is not so much what happens around you that matters, but rather your attitude towards it.

Indeed, great leaders are not defined by their times, as the historians would teach us; what defines a great leader is how he or she chooses to respond to those times. It is our actions that define us, not the events that happen around us. It is the decisions we make, not the drama we face.

These interesting times are presenting you – all of us – with a choice. As organizational leaders, we really just have two options: we can circle the wagons, realize that we are all in this together, and begin to collaborate, to cooperate, to focus, to break down barriers and shatter petty political games; or we can circle like sharks, falling into the Five Deadly Don'ts and very likely take our organization down with us.

Remember, it is how you choose to respond to these interesting times – indeed, these extraordinary times – that will define you.

Finally, I'll end with a simple question. *As a leader during these interesting times, how would you like to be remembered?*

*This is the first part in a two-part series by Kevin Baum, on the Five Deadly Don'ts. In Part Two, Baum will share three strategies to beat down the Deadly Don'ts: the Power of Purpose, the Power to Empower, and the Power of Perspective.*

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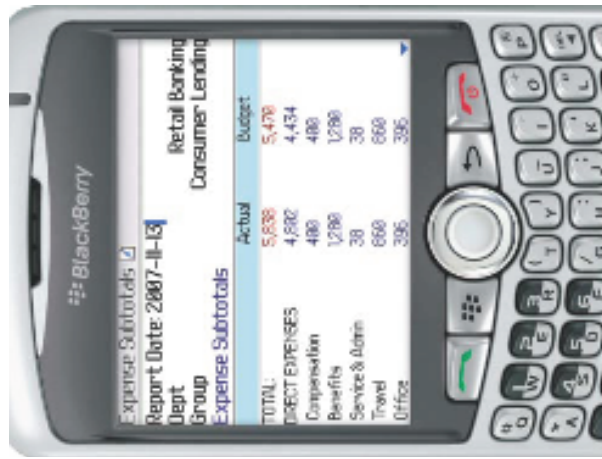
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