

# THREE WAYS **NOT** TO RESPOND WHEN LOST

BY CHRIS HSIUNG



Last summer I was hiking with my friends around a lake in Alberta's Peter Lougheed Provincial Park. The day was beautiful with plenty of great conversations. Then someone mentioned that the lake was no longer in sight. Not to worry, we reasoned, it should be just around the bend. We were lost, but we didn't know it yet...

When the landscape suddenly shifts, whether it's a coming hailstorm or a global economic crisis, people respond in ways that are often unhelpful. Fortunately, these responses are often predictable. Here are three responses to watch for in yourself and in your employees.

#### Denial

Despite having a map and an experienced hiker, we continued to hike merrily in the wrong direction. Psychologists have found that small children when asked if they are lost will say, "No, my Mommy is lost."<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, lost people resist admitting they are lost.

Before employees can begin the process of adaptation, there must be an admission that times have changed and that old models no longer work. To help people break out of denial in hard times, however, requires a strong foundation of *Einheit* or mutual trust. Without trust, people are unwilling to be vulnerable or admit to any uncertainties, let alone face them. Part of your role as a leader is to create a safe and courageous space. If you can model being lost, making mistakes, and finding your way, others are more likely to follow suit.

#### Task Fixation

Unfortunately, when people realize that something has changed, the first response is often to do whatever they were doing, but with more effort. Let's walk a little faster. The lake must be around here somewhere! With doom in the news and massive layoffs, it can be comforting to work harder on what one knows best.

Peter Drucker, the father of modern management, spoke to the allure of fixating on the known saying, "The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic."

A far better response when one is lost is this. Sit down on a log, have a drink, get everyone comfortable, and convene a conversation. Avoid the urge to jump to solutions and instead ask: What questions need to be asked? Do as Einstein suggests: given 20 days to solve a problem, spend the first 19 defining the problem.

#### Wanting the Simple Fix

Freed from yesterday's logic, lost people often grasp for simple answers without a depth of understanding. For instance, folk wisdom suggests that all rivers lead to civilization. In Nova Scotia, following this wisdom would lead you into a swamp.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, companies in the midst of chaos will frequently oversimplify what is complex and consequently apply one-dimensional solutions. Companies like Circuit City fired their most experienced staff to save money only to have their customers leave because of poor service.<sup>3</sup>

One way to get people out of this mindset is to storyboard a range of possible future scenarios.<sup>4</sup> One client was able to generate a richer set of potential actions by working through multiple scenarios with his employees. Scenario planning is just one way of helping everyone embrace the complexity rather than avoiding it.

Learning to be lost as a group is a part of building resiliency. Enjoy this part of the journey! In the end, my friends and I faced our mistakes, stopped, re-oriented, and found our way back to the lake before sunset. We were tired, but returned better equipped at how to be lost together.

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#### Citations

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3. Bill Taylor, "The Secret of Success in a Failing Economy" (Harvard Business Publishing) <http://blogs.harvardbusiness.org/taylor/> December 4, 2008.
4. Kahane, Adam. *Solving Tough Problems* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2004)

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