

Recovering from “The Big Fall”

by **MARK BRESLIN**
Special Contributor

AUGUST 2008. *It's a fine day at 8,500 feet. The Sierra peaks are shining in the sun. The thin air is crisp and clear. No one within miles. No e-mails, cell phone or interruptions. A week in the backcountry, just me and my wife Susan. I lead us up a rough trail toward a knife-edged ridge. Behind me I hear the unmistakable sound of her falling. We're 15 miles into the backcountry, alone.*

It is remarkable in life and business how quickly things can change from good to bad. You can consider every angle and yet you can still feel unprepared for the speed and severity of the challenges that you must face. In 2009 anyone except the very fortunate or the very reckless bravely faced the fall. The fall included the market, prices, profit, employment and opportunity. And this fall came after a decade of unprecedented opportunity and relatively easy money for both labor and management. It made it more steep and painful. It made it a fall that required action.

She's in the gravel holding her knee with that gritted face we all get when trying to suppress pain. In less than three seconds a small stumble put all her weight behind her knee then drove it into a sharp granite edge. As I pry her fingers off her bloody knee I see with alarm a very deep cut and the edge of muscle tissue. I clean it, tear up my shirt and bind it. We've got a 3 mile hike just to get back to our camp.

There are successive strategies for dealing with “The Big Fall.” First you react. You do what needs to be done because you have to. No amount of hoping gets you past this first step, unless you are in deep denial. Those contractors and union leaders in denial in this market will likely permanently lose market share, volume and membership. The market of yesterday is not coming back as it was — one based on foolish exuberance, fraud and unsustainable credit. Despite this, I can see some leaders limping along



still telling themselves the denial story. Like they didn't read about GM. Like they have not watched every other union segment of American and Canadian industry face the same exact challenges. On the other hand, the smart business people are rapidly moving past denial or reaction to forward strategy; asking what do I do differently now to put myself in the best position? What are the things I can and cannot control? How do I go from reactive to proactive? What needs to change right now?

We need a doctor and a hospital now. An SAT phone is out of my pack and in my hand in one minute. A pre-planned tool and reward for the proactive. I call across the sky to the horse packing outfitter. I am told a team will come to retrieve us and our gear in five hours. By the time they come and pack the mules we will be riding out in complete darkness. There's only one thing to do. I bandage her wound and pack our stuff. Then we wait. And the sun goes down.

Leadership combines strategic action with forward thinking. Leadership maximizes value by leveraging talent and

resources. Leadership focuses on the critical few issues and not the diffused many so that the return on time and effort is noteworthy, obvious and motivating for the team. Leadership takes action in the face of “The Big Fall” knowing that only a plan of action bridges the good and the bad. Leadership demands that employees and union members understand and accept their reality. Leadership is not tentative. It must be bold in addressing crisis and creating opportunity.

We mount our horses in the dark. My horse knows it should be in bed and is looking at me funny. I am not encouraged. On the narrow trail I can't see my hand in front of my face. The horses can still apparently see and also follow by scent. We ride white knuckled over a 10,000 foot pass and the trail and sky open up with millions of brilliant stars above. It's bitter cold with hours to go. But even with the discomfort, with everything taken care of as best as it can be, we have no option but to simply hold tight to the reins, ride through the dark and trust that the destination is close at hand.

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2010 is about holding tight to the reins. 2010 is about staying on the trail with a firm destination in mind. It is a long hard trail that contractors, union leaders and rank and file are traveling. Many too have been traveling in the darkness for up to a year. And though the comforting rays of daylight and a better market may still be a year off, those firmly planted in the saddle, who lead with a proactive vision, are much more likely to make it all the way home.

We arrive at 3 a.m. at the hospital. It's been too many hours now for her to be stitched. She's mad it's going to leave an

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ugly scar but her girly vanity is balanced by her 11 stoic hours of pain without one complaint. Most importantly, though, we have made it "home."

What were the components that led us to resolution?

- Effective pre-planning.
- A proactive action plan.
- A motivated and non-complaining partner.
- A competent rescue team willing to take risk.
- A clear final destination in mind.

These are what took us across mountains and what it takes to ride through to the end of this market.

Tough times are often our best teacher. The lessons from this market on leadership, management and change lessons should serve as the foundation for our future goals and

ambitions. You have to keep moving up. For me and Susan, after her fall, what might that future goal be? She tells me it will be the view at 20,000 feet when we climb the Cho La Pass near Everest in Nepal this spring. No fear. No discouragement. I should have known. I guess in summary, that in the recovery from our "Big Fall" we have to learn what we can learn, not let the disappointment or pain of the past discourage us, and shoot higher as soon as we are able... ■



Mark Breslin is a strategist and author who focuses on improving organizational performance, leadership and work ethic. Known for his blunt and uncompromising style, he has addressed more than 500 audiences and well over 100,000 leaders, managers and craft workers. He is the author of Survival of the Fittest, Organize or Die, Million Dollar Blue Collar, and Alpha Dog: Leading, Managing & Motivating in the Construction Industry.

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