

# Keep calm and carry on. Really?

Mark Wright wonders if this really is the best idea

A new fridge magnet appeared recently in the kitchen of the Wright Family residence. You have probably seen the one – bold, clear and exuding understated authority: Keep Calm and Carry On, it suggests.

I like it and it makes me smile but, while searching in vain for a cache of chocolate nestled in the salad drawer, it made me think about some of the work I have been doing recently, particularly in the cultural sector. Is now the time for leaders in the sector (and I include you in this) to really follow the fridge magnet message or actually do the opposite: get agitated and innovate?

It is probably not a coincidence that since the beginning of the current economic recession, many of us have taken ironic solace in the red and white mantra of Keep Calm and Carry On, now seen on T-shirts, coffee mugs and staff-room walls across the country. Originally designed in 1939 as a morale-boosting, but fortunately never used, message to the British public in the event of hostile invasion, the *Economist* referred to the popularity of this now iconic poster as a 'nostalgia for a certain British character, an outlook... [that] taps directly into the country's mythic image of itself: unshowily brave and just a little stiff, brewing tea as the bombs fall'.

In a not entirely unrelated leap, I have spent quite a bit of time recently in Helsinki, being with amazing people working for a certain mobile phone manufacturer. One of the first Finnish words they taught me was *sisu*. This is a deceptively complex term, broadly translating as 'gritty determination,

perseverance and acting rationally under pressure'. It now embodies a national characteristic and having *sisu* is seen as a badge of honour. It came to the fore in the response of the Finns to the almost overwhelming Soviet invasion of their country in the Winter War of 1939–1940, and is still seen today as the name of an indefatigable and ubiquitous make of Finnish construction lorry. These lorries continue to roll inexorably through the harshness of the arctic winter, regardless of the extreme conditions, without fuss, without fanfare.

So, just as with the fridge magnet message, *sisu* represents a fine sentiment: determination in the face of adversity. But I see a need for something else. I see a need for leaders to do more; to consistently create the environment for other people to be creative, playful and brilliant. And that is really tough in the current climate.

The prevailing societal and economic conditions we found ourselves in, if left unresisted, nudge us all towards a mind-set of prevention, caution and minimising risk. It is a very basic human driver, both for us as individuals and as groups and consequently in the cultures we create: we don't want to get hurt and we seek to protect ourselves and those we care about. The psychologist Dr Michael J. Apter

got to the heart of it in his work on motivational states. His Reversal Theory research found that we cannot be in two emotional places at the same time; if our perceptions of our experiences are serious then we won't respond playfully, if we find comfort in conforming then we won't want to be the class rebel, when we assess others on mastery, we move away from empathy and when we find ourselves threatened, we will increasingly act at the expense of others.

I am hugely simplifying Apter's conclusions but my point is this: how we perceive our prevailing environment influences our emotional state and that, in turn, directly affects our behaviours and interactions with others, and therefore the decisions we make and the working cultures we develop.

The good news is that we are not powerless in this situation. What is needed is an active state of choosing – a very conscious decision to break the cycle of drift.

The inherent challenge, as you will probably have already worked out, is that it isn't easy! It takes huge and sustained effort to change embedded mindsets and self-limiting assumptions, particularly in complex organisations. However, if you feel inspired to address your leadership responsibility (remember: leaders create the environment for other

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people to flourish), then the weak point in the prevention cycle is 'behaviour'. It is a causal cycle that works both ways, so by actively choosing the behaviours you want to demonstrate, you will change how you feel and think. In the words of the US psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan, 'it is easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than think your way into a new way of acting'. Or if you prefer the Alcoholics Anonymous version, you can always 'fake it till you make it'.

So if you need your team or your organisation to be more adventurous, more playful, more creative, more challenging, more curious, then start with your own behaviour, even if you don't feel it yet! And as you consistently embody these behaviours then those around you will begin to mirror them and it will change how they feel too. You will have successfully put Apter's Reversal Theory into practice.

In creating a working environment that actively rails against the prevailing prevention mindset by behaving in an expansive, playful, rebellious way, you will also generate a hidden and maybe paradoxical bonus. You will have established a culture of 'adaptive resilience'.

This shouldn't be confused with the traditional idea of 'organisational resilience' which is about rigorous systems and processes, designed to get everything back to how it was, regardless of the disruption. A simple example would be the suspension systems in our cars, designed to absorb changes in the road surface and return to a steady state as quickly as possible. In this context think

about Blackberry's recent back-up server problems, last winter's airport disruption, our emergency responses to natural disasters. Success is measured in the time taken to get everything up and running again.

Organisational resilience is understandably highly prized, essential in almost any system and also intrinsically linked to a prevention mindset.

By contrast, in creating an environment of 'adaptive resilience', you foster and celebrate a promotion mindset, where there is little or no desire to return to how it was. Instead, teams actively want to evolve, grow, shrink, reinvent themselves and establish fresh relationships with customers, audiences and stakeholders. In this place, behaviours of play, support, challenge, competent failure and mutual respect are supported by an emotional security brought about by absolute clarity for the deep intent of the team.

Now don't get me wrong, I know it all sounds idealistic and fluffy. However, this is also a place of purposeful urgency, continuous feedback, personal responsibility and difficult decisions. It requires

each individual to contribute not only their skills and time but also their discretionary gifts of passion, curiosity, insight and courage. There is also an absolute and explicit need for self-organising capacity in the organisation; this alone is often a massive trust challenge for those with leadership and management responsibility.

So this is the challenge: how much do you want to embark on this journey, to start leading the context, not the content, and to create a promotion culture of playful rebelliousness?

Or would you prefer to 'keep calm and carry on'? ●



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