



Fight Through the Ambush

How to Thrive When Shit Hits the Fan Jake Wood

It was March, 2007, in al Anbar Province, Iraq—known colloquially as the Triangle of Death. My platoon had just raided a suspected insurgent bomb-making operation located in a rural marketplace. We'd quietly rolled down the shoddily paved road right before sunrise, and, as soon as the warm Mid-East sun crested the horizon, we hit them hard—blasting off locks with thunderous shotguns and kicking in doors with dusty boots.

The raid went exactly as planned. That is, until it didn't

We'd been on the scene for nearly an hour—tearing apart buildings in search of materials and interrogating suspects detained on site. That's when the first shot rang out. A simple crack, like a bullwhip, shattered the air.

Within an instant, chaos ensued. Machine gun fire poured in from three positions and suddenly the perfectly scripted operation we'd just been executing completely unraveled.

The moment it happened, I found myself on top of a roof about a hundred and fifty yards from our vehicles, trying to connect via radio to our combat operations center (COC) located about eight miles away. That's when I saw the first bullet tear through the neck of one of our Marines. He was down.

We suddenly found ourselves in a complex ambush. The fight was on.

When I say it was on, I mean it was really on, and it got worse before it got better. It took us twenty minutes to break through and move our casualty to an extraction point. Our carefully crafted battle plan, it turned out, didn't survive first contact with the enemy.

There's a reason that the word ambush has made its way into American corporate vernacular. In today's volatile and hypercompetitive business world, we are all constantly on the front lines. And in an environment where the most seemingly untouchable companies are being unseated at a moment's notice and the most bedrock of industries are being disrupted seemingly overnight, even the very best companies or teams, those that seem to be sure-footedly humming along on the road to riches, are suddenly finding themselves embroiled in an existential battle for survival.

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The threats seem to materialize out of nowhere—maybe it's the unexpected emergence of a competitor, a natural disaster that destroys your supply chain, or tightening regulations that make the old way of doing things suddenly impossible. More often than not they converge simultaneously—the dreaded “complex ambush” in military terms. Getting ambushed sucks, no doubt about it. The ability to fight your way through to the other side, however, is what sets great leaders apart.

So forget about trying to avoid going to battle. In today's world, being a high-stakes leader means stepping into the arena. It means clenching your fists and tightening your jaw because you know you're going to get ambushed by the enemy. You will be crossed by investors (it's happened to me), betrayed by friends (it's happened to me), called incompetent (it's happened to me). You will lose sleep over payroll (it's happened to me), fire passionate people close to you (it's happened to me), and you will regret the day you ever decided to step into the arena (it's happened to me). Then, you'll wake up the next day thankful that yours is a life of purpose, and you'll look back upon the enemy with contempt, because they couldn't best you.

If you are reading this, I'll assume you're aiming to be that kind of leader. The kind determined to clench your teeth and close your eyes and step out into that unknown, knowing full well that the enemies of success lie in wait.

But how to be the kind of leader who not only survives but thrives when the stakes are high?

That's a great question, because there's no simple formula. $A + B + C$ does not always equal success when you're being ambushed, but there are plenty of things you can do to maximize the chances you'll come out alive.

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Build a Team You'd Go to War With

Seen Rambo? Yeah, forget about Hollywood's fiction of the lone warrior. The myth of the one-man army is as old as Achilles, but even Achilles had a heel—and when it was pierced by an arrow, who came after him?

So build a team. Better yet, build a team you'd go to war with—a high impact team. The organization I run, Team Rubicon, is aptly named. Everything we've done—every ambush we've overcome—has been because we are a team willing to do whatever it takes to succeed. How did we get to that point? Well, to start, we were deliberate in assembling that team from the very beginning. Our mantra in hiring has always been that passion trumps talent, but culture is king. Of course, putting the pieces in place is only the beginning.

After that you have to coalesce that team into a single, living organism whose collective survival is dependent on the actions of each unit. You achieve that through a number of things, but primary to all of them are a shared vision and mutual trust. Our vision—to become the best disaster response organization in the world while providing returning veterans with an unparalleled sense of purpose in a new mission—is an easy one to align behind. But what about trust?

Trust comes from three things: training, transparency, and tribulations. With training, everyone knows that everyone else knows what they're supposed to know. That's liberating; to not have to wonder if someone can competently complete their tasks. Transparency ensures that everyone feels empowered with information. They know not just the what, but the why. And tribulations, the small trials that we go through together, form the special bonds upon which trust is built.

Keep it Simple (Stupid)

Ambushes are difficult because they're confusing. Whether in the battlefield or the boardroom, chaos can ensue in an instant, lines of communication break down and tensions rise. Often, multiple and rapidly changing inputs can overwhelm the brain's capacity to process them. Combat this by putting a simple framework in place.

In business as in war, no two ambushes are exactly the same. Even with those challenges you've faced a million times—be it a tough client meeting, a botched marketing campaign, or a kink in your sales strategy—nothing ever goes wrong in the same exact way twice. Generally, around 80% of the circumstances will be ones you've seen before; 20% will be completely new and foreign. The key, then, is to devise a framework that enables your team to rely upon standard processes and procedure that can handle the 80% of what's thrown at them that they've seen before. This liberates them to expend their creative energies on generating solutions to the remaining 20% of circumstance they haven't.

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Many people will refer to this framework as “bureaucracy.” They’ll lambast it for “slowing them down” and making them like every other big business out there. The reality is that standard operating procedures—what some people call bureaucracy—can serve to either bog organizations down or empower them to move faster. The difference lies in the type of team that you’ve built and the attitude that you bring with it. The truly successful, the ones that fight through the ambushes without ever seeming to break a sweat, are those who have built a team that is so aligned that they can execute in a way that seems almost effortless.

Communicate

The military has a mantra: shoot, move, and communicate. Essentially, under the doctrine of “fire and maneuver” warfare, the theory is that fire without movement is a waste of ammo, but movement without fire is suicide. In other words, the two functions—fire and movement—only work in concert with one another. However, both are hopeless without one thing—communication. Imagine if, rather than coordinating who will execute the attack, both soldiers pick up and start running across the field at the same time? That scenario would end badly.

So we can see that communication is critical in crisis situations. But, what's most important is not that we communicate, but how we communicate. Here are a few keys:

- **Be clear and concise.** Avoid speaking in euphemisms and allegories. Don't sugarcoat. Clear, concise communication includes the Five Ws: who, what, where, when and (most important) why. Consider using standard formats for critical information. For example, during the ambush in Iraq at the beginning of this piece, I requested my team give me an ACE report—which stands for ammo, casualties, and equipment. It's simple, it's standard, and I know what I'm listening for.
- **Be respectful.** Times of ambush are stressful, and too often that stress can creep into our communication. Stress in battle and in organizations is contagious—the best way to lose the confidence of those you lead is to let them see you sweat. So think before you speak. Take a deep breath.

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- **Take notes.** You'll never see a Marine at a briefing without his or her notebook. This is essential whether you're the one briefing or getting briefed. The more pressure we're under, the more prone we are to forgetting. Writing things down ensures they get remembered.
- **Repeat back what you heard.** When you're under attack, there is a lot going on, and the variables are hard to keep straight. When someone conveys a lot of information to you or tasks you with something complex, repeat it back to them to make sure everyone is on the same page.
- **Don't forget to say please and thank you** to everyone from your second-in-command, to the guy who keeps the floors vacuumed and the trash cans empty. Seriously, don't forget.

Stay Above the Fray

As the leader it is often tempting to roll up your sleeves and start executing the nitty gritty yourself. It's an important trait—being willing to toil alongside your teammates—but it can also get you in trouble. When I talk about staying above the fray I often describe how the Marine Corps used to not issue rifles to young platoon leaders. Why?

Platoon leaders, most often lieutenants, are in charge of leading platoons of up to forty men in combat. You can imagine that if you're going into combat you'd want a rifle, right? I mean, you might have to shoot! Well the Marine Corps didn't see it that way—they would rather the lieutenants not be firing their rifles...instead they should be leading their men.

You see... it's not the leaders job to shoot the enemy, or make sales calls, or write the software code, or work the retail floor. It's the leader's job to lead. Leave it to your team to execute the nitty gritty, and in doing so keep yourself free to set strategy, to evaluate the changing circumstances and the outcomes. In order to do it well, follow these steps.

- **Organize your team for maximum flexibility.** Issue them what the military calls a “commanders intent”—a short statement clarifying the ultimate goal you want achieved, and what that end-state look like. Once you issue this, get out of the way and let your team adapt to meet the challenge.
- **Empower young leaders to solve problems.** Take the reins off junior leaders and you'll be amazed at just how innovative they can be. Suddenly, problems that used to surface at your level will mysteriously disappear. To do this, establish expectations for how you want decisions made, not what decisions to make.

- **Take away your own rifle.** What is it that you're chained to that keeps you from leading effectively? Are you obsessively monitoring daily sales numbers? Instead, have someone on your team issue you monthly reports. Or it could be something as innocuous as obsessively checking email. Shut it off and force yourself to walk around the office to check in on the team, evaluate progress and socialize potential solutions. Then delegate someone on your team to sift through the onslaught streaming into your inbox.

Take Care of Your People

In the Marines, leaders eat last. At the end of a long day of training, when the platoon is lined up outside the chow hall, the leader makes sure every last private is fed before taking to the scraps herself. In the early days of Team Rubicon I told every single person we hired the same thing—that I would pay them before I paid myself.

Take care of your people for two reasons: first, because they're people and it's the right thing to do and, second, because taking care of your people is good for business. It's that simple. You can take care of people in two ways: economically and emotionally. If you can afford to compensate people well, then you should. It's good for them, for our economy and for our country.

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As a nonprofit, Team Rubicon cannot pay the salaries that many of our incredibly talented team members could command elsewhere. But, we do make it a point to take care of them with great health insurance and a great retirement plan (literally called the Kick Ass Retirement Plan, or KARP). We do this because what we do is stressful, and requires a lot of sacrifice. That stress and sacrifice extends to their families, and the last thing I want any of my employees or their families to do is stress about something that I can control (like whether or not they’re going to be bankrupted by medical bills). I’d rather they save their stress for when we’re responding to a Cat-5 hurricane.

Probably more important than taking care of people economically is taking care of them emotionally. It doesn’t cost any money (or doesn’t have to) to make someone feel valued. Show your appreciation for their efforts, praise them in front of their peers. Give them a random afternoon off to surprise their kid and pick them up from school. Demand that they take vacation to decompress. Get to know them, and don’t make it feel like a chore. Take a real interest in their life. Celebrate their life’s best moments and mourn with them when bad things happen.

If you take care of your people, they will follow you into the line of fire.

As I stated in the beginning, there's no recipe for guaranteed success in a high stakes endeavor. But, if you can build a team, keep it simple, communicate clearly, stay above the fray and take care of your people, **you'll be better prepared to not just survive, but to thrive when shit hits the fan.** 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | **Jake Wood** is cofounder and CEO of Team Rubicon. A former Marine sniper with tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, he has been profiled by *Forbes*, *People*, and on CNN and has been named a 2012 CNN Hero and awarded the 2011 GQ Better Men Better World Award. **Team Rubicon** is a disaster relief organization that unites military veterans and first responders to rapidly deploy emergency response teams to areas hit by natural disasters. Widely recognized for its organizational efficiency and ability to be one of the first to reach the most devastated, remote, and needy areas, they have been instrumental in over 50 missions ranging from South Sudan and Haiti, to Joplin, Missouri and Hurricane Sandy.

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