

Surfing, sinking and swimming

by Binney, Wilke & Williams

"Don't panic, you're only human"

We worked with a group of managers in a well-known multinational. The group had a stormy time. There were strong-minded managers from many different cultures and backgrounds and the pressures to perform were intense. After some months the group had a review session. The Czech manager in the group said: *"I really appreciate being in this group and have learnt a lot. I also never want to go through that again!"* One of us said: *"Oh yes you will go through it again – but it may be less painful because you will recognize the patterns next time. You will also know that you don't have to do it alone. You could pick up the phone."*

A key conclusion of our research is that effective leadership does not happen evenly or consistently. Leaders will have periods when they feel they are surfing, others when they seem to be sinking and periods when they are swimming along fine. The idea that they can be competent, unfailing and effective all the time is another idealistic and burdensome fantasy. It is normal as a leader to have periods when you think you are sinking and others when you are just getting by; it is an inherent part of leading.

The choice that you have as a leader is how you respond and feel about going down. We encourage you not to be too hard on yourself. If you can avoid beating yourself up for falling off the surfboard and avoid panic, you can learn a lot. It doesn't mean you won't come off the board again and again. But it does make falling off less frightening – and enables you to improve your skills and to believe in your self more.



You are swimming despite that sinking feeling

We found leaders in our research moving in and out of three modes, as shown in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Surfing, sinking and swimming

Mode	Coming alive	Surviving	Coping
Feeling	Surfing	Sinking	Swimming
Characteristics	Well connected Able to think clearly Tolerates complexity and uncertainty Tolerates disillusionment and reality as it is Able to use whole self, feeling as well as thinking	Disconnected Unable to think clearly Simplify complexity Blaming and scapegoating Sees self as victim Trapped in the future Over-dependent on bosses for survival Getting lost in detail and losing the script	Some connections Defensive up to a point Moaning while coping Takes some responsibility and initiative Busy, busy but still able to think Struggles with finding the courage to stand up to the boss and the group
	Able to ask for and receive help	Can't ask for help but will send signals like spilling the coffee over someone; dependent on others to offer help	Complaining is the cry for help
Focus	Short and long term	Very short term	Short term

Surviving

Sometimes the response of leaders to seemingly unreasonable expectations and frustrating realities was to go into survival mode. By this we mean a state in which a leader is unable to form effective relationships with the people around him; an isolated position where the only thing that matters is surviving and complying with the wishes of the bosses. At its extreme, this becomes a refusal to attach to others. This was sometimes combined with flight to fantastic ideas of togetherness and **team-working**, an imagined world of shared purpose. There was an inability to hold the middle ground, of realistic connections with people, here and now.

We all, at times, go into survival mode. We switch off from the people around us, we stop thinking and using all our senses, we focus only on getting through the day. We are reactive, we do the minimum to get by. We lose the ability to shape events or take the initiative. We lose sight of what is acceptable behaviour or conduct - so preoccupied are we with getting through the day without any further damage. We seem self-absorbed.

Sometimes it happens when we are tired or stressed or when we have suffered a personal loss. We feel hopelessly overloaded. There is just too much to think about and to do. The survival mode makes good sense as a coping mechanism. In a time of upheaval, the instinct for organisational survival can result in quite primitive behaviour. The incessant pressure for results, monitoring, constant progress checks, anxious pressure from above, the mistrust and the defensive paralysis in teams in reaction to the pressure, sometimes pushed leaders into this mode. The leaders may have felt uncomfortable about it but their physical and emotional resources were taken up by the struggle to respond effectively to the fluctuating demands of top management.

They became skilled at surviving - at the cost of being cut off from their colleagues and losing a sense of adequate self-esteem.

When leaders were surviving, it was impossible for them to think clearly enough to ask for help. Sometimes leaders did send distress signals- irrational or strange behavior - that others might pick up. However, those offering help had to tread very carefully. An offer of help could be perceived as an attack.

In one case we saw a leader who was at times cut off from the people around him. He had just one confidant with whom he could talk openly about the issues facing the business. He was rather contemptuous of the rest of the people, saying they weren't up to the minimum standard of competence that he expected. The business pressures were intense. Although the leader put a brave face on things, it became clear that profitability was not adequate. A series of erratic decisions were made, without adequate research, first to give some types of business lower priority, then subsequently to give them high priority. Support from the leader's boss, which at first had seemed quite firm, became increasingly doubtful. Just as the leader wasn't there for his subordinates, so the boss was increasingly not available when the leader wanted him. The leader was not aware of all this until later. Indeed this is one of the characteristics of being in survivor mode. You are not aware of how you have been functioning until some change- or simply the passage of time -causes you to step back and reflect.

Surviving is the embodiment of the human capacity to cope with unbelievable amounts of stress and change. It has a high cost- to self, group, organisation and customer. For the self, the cost is additional denigration. You feel bad about yourself for being compliant and not being true to your feelings and thoughts - if you allow yourself to feel it. For the group, the cost is the inability to handle the strategic or operational issues effectively. For the organisation, the cost is the falsification of information that the organisation needs to be effective. *"Max couldn't manage the people - so he managed the paper clips instead."* A manager in our research talking about a previous leader.

Coping

Coping was a less dramatic way of dealing with the pressures. In this mode leaders struck others as somewhat defensive. They might react negatively in the moment to an idea or a comment but they were able to hear suggestions from others and might well act on them later. They could connect with some people, particularly those with whom they had long-standing relationships. They complained about other people and about the amount to do, however, they weren't bitter. Their criticisms were qualified with some self-awareness and gentle self-mockery. They were incredibly busy but they gave you the sense that they weren't just reacting to others. They were also able sometimes to take the initiative.

A particular challenge for leaders in this mode was finding the courage challenging the groups around them and kept control of issues by dealing with questions one-on-one with individual reports.

In this mode leaders were able to accept help - from colleagues or friends, human resource managers or consultants. They could see the value of assistance and did not see offers of help as an attack. In the

research we found that this stance was often good enough in reality. It only became bad when measured in terms of heroic leadership.

Coming alive

Coming alive is when leaders are able to use all their intelligence, senses and experience to connect with others and make sense of the context. They don't forget their life experience. They are able to acknowledge when a situation is different from ones they have experienced before and they need to pause and think again. They are able to tolerate the complexity of events and people and not rush to simple-minded solutions that don't make sense. Their focus is on both long and short term issues. They can ask for and receive help.

We described the pattern of leaders surfing, sinking and swimming to a group of managers in one multinational. They picked up immediately on the idea and played with it for much of an afternoon, though they were suspicious that surfing sounded like too much fun. They weren't sure how much surfing they did as leaders. One manager commented that, for those who knew the sport, surfing had become much more demanding now in Australia. You're not supposed any more just to get up on the board and ride one wave as far as you can. You're supposed to get to the top, have a short ride and then jump to the next wave. Surfing has become wave hopping.

This new style of surfing seemed like a metaphor for the absurd expectations placed nowadays on leaders.

Learning from the different modes

You can't be at your best all the time- you can't surf forever - but you can recognise the value of surviving and coping. They are essential if you are to learn as a leader - and if you are to get done all the things you need to do.

We encourage you to debrief the moment - to allow time to make sense, after a meeting, event or interaction, of what was happening. To review: the task, your use of self and the dynamics of the group. Leaders need moments to review and see when and where they were blind, when they were blocked and when others helped them.

It is important to consider when and how it is realistic to step back. Can you debrief yourself - and take account of the stuff below the surface of history, time and culture? Does the moment feel right to go back over your experience and see what you can learn from it? Can you reflect with others? Can you feed back your reflections at a moment when people can deal with it and not feel attacked? We talk more about how to review and learn in Chapters 9 and 11.

Healthy disillusionment

In our research, a key, if the leader were to come alive more often, was **healthy disillusionment** - letting go of an original dream, allowing it to be modified and adapted but avoiding too much bitterness, blaming of others or self-reproach. Finding the courage to disappoint and be disappointed was, paradoxically, a key to delivery.

Inevitably, all of our leaders went through a process of disillusionment after the idealisation phase as their hopes and expectations came into conflict with chaotic and unpalatable realities. The cycle of dreaming, disillusionment, new hope is a natural process. It is dreams (hopes, ambitions) that get people out of bed in the morning and fire them up. What mattered was not that they lost their illusions but the way in which this journey was negotiated. Disillusion hurts - particularly for those who are self-

absorbed. The trick was to leave a space for healthy disillusionment and for finding new dreams.

For followers, the **healthy disillusionment** often means coming to terms with the leader they have and letting go of the leader they might wish to have in some perfect world. Again and again we saw people dumping the problems of organisations on the leader. The transformational hero model encourages them to do this and it can be very comfortable. Followers say to themselves, *"There is nothing we can do. The boss just isn't up to it. He doesn't have a clear vision of where the organisation is going, he doesn't inspire, he doesn't communicate clearly enough, he doesn't stick to the script, he doesn't empower, he doesn't give us a clear framework to work within."* However, unfortunately, he is the leader and, often, he is going to stay as leader. The choice for followers is to work with him, as he is, or stand back and keep aloof.

For leaders, too, there is the process of letting go of the idea of the fantasy leader, of seeing that the ideal is self-destructive. If you stay wedded to the idea of the transforming hero, you end up, as a leader, focusing on the ideal instead of what's around you. For the sake of the higher ideal, you cut yourself off from the people you depend on.

If you can let go of the ideal, then it becomes possible to seize the moment and be a leader, here and now. In the research we saw again and again the opportunities to lead in the moment. We saw that when leaders do connect with others, get real about the context and develop their self-awareness - as they do their daily work - it strengthens the leader, develops the team and frees up energy for delivery and commitment.