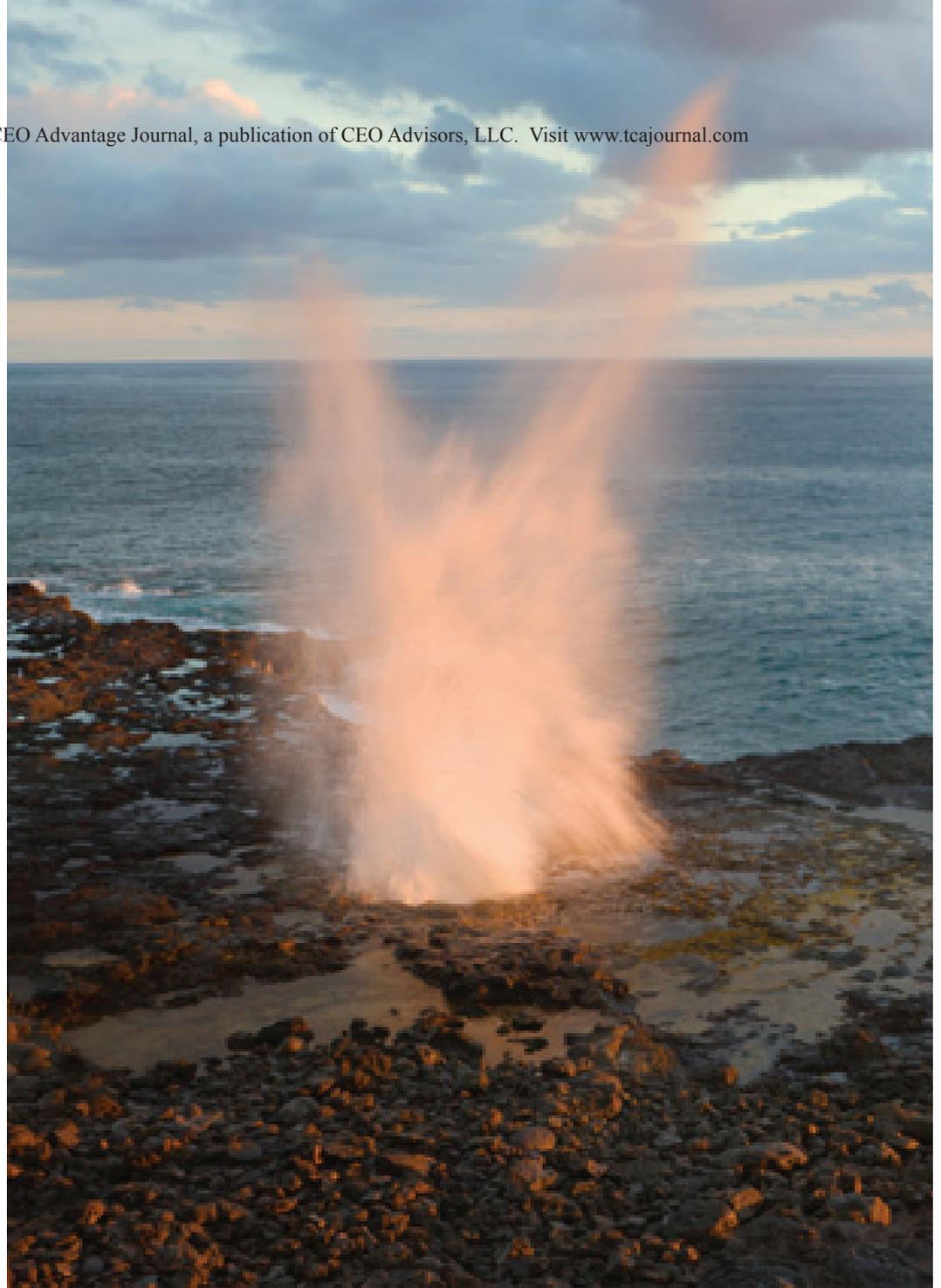


What Is the Worst That Can Happen?

*by Prafulla Pande
and Tom Cox*

How business leaders
can be proactive in
overcoming their fears.



Spouting Horn, Hawaii (Paul Clark) Paul R. Clark, Copyright 2010

Have you ever made a cold call?

How did it feel? If you're like most of us, you were probably nervous. Perhaps you made the call only after putting it off for awhile. When you finally decided you had to get it done, you sat at your desk for several anxious minutes reviewing your pitch, practicing your delivery, and trying to anticipate the response. Finally, you wiped your sweaty hands and dialed the number, clearing your throat several times to remove any possibility of a voice crack that could betray your lack of confidence.

There is only one word to describe this feeling: fear. It makes us feel weak to admit it, but that's what it is. Emotions play an important role in our daily lives, and fear is one such emotion. It's an instinctive response to danger – not necessarily real danger, but perceived danger.

Think about the cold call. What is it exactly that you fear? You're calling someone you have never met and offering them something that you believe will benefit them and you. You know your product better than they do, so you're not going to look stupid. If they hang up on you, have you lost anything? They won't give you a second thought, and they wouldn't know

you if they passed you on the street. Is there really anything scary in this scenario? Not really.

That realization provides a clue for how to overcome our fears. We must learn to differentiate between perceived danger and real danger. When the danger is merely perceived but not real, we must train ourselves to act accordingly.

Fear is the most destructive force in the human mind. In the cold call example, you have the opportunity to make a sale or gain a client, but your fear – perhaps its fear of rejection or fear of looking stupid – threatens to eliminate this possibility. Other fears for business executives include fear of making decisions, fear of change, fear of confrontation, fear of public speaking, fear of loss, fear of failure, or even fear of success. The mere existence of these real or perceived fears creates indecisiveness and seriously affects the performance of executives. “Fear defeats more people than any other one thing in the world,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson.

You and your business cannot afford to let these fears control you, so you must take proactive steps to confront and conquer your fears. Hesitation only magnifies fears and squelches your confidence. We know of someone who frequently makes cold calls to offer his advising services. Does he get a lot of rejections? Yes. Does he enjoy that? No. But does it shake his confidence? Absolutely not. “I’m offering something that I know can help their business,” he says. “If they reject me, that’s their loss.”

That’s the attitude we need to have in all situations, and it takes practice. We would like to share with you how some of our experiences have helped us conquer our fears in hopes that it will be helpful to you in your executive role.

A GAME-CHANGING QUESTION

Many years ago when I (Prafulla) was in 8th grade, my headmaster, Mr. Joseph, organized a debate contest. When he visited my class to urge us to participate, nobody volunteered. Everyone was afraid of getting onstage and speaking to an audience. Josie (as Mr. Joseph was popularly known) tried desperately to motivate us, but none of his arguments or threats prompted anyone to step forward. Finally, he yelled, “What’s

the worst that can happen to you when you are on the stage?” Something clicked in me when he said that, and I finally decided to join the contest.

Josie showed me how to conquer fear: confront the danger by walking right into it. To this day, I don’t ever step to a podium without hearing Josie’s words in my mind: *what’s the worst that can happen to you when you are on the stage?* After years of asking that question, I can honestly say that I usually step on a stage with no fear at all.

FACING FEAR

A few years ago, I (Prafulla) purchased a small business. Despite never having a sales assignment at any point in my career, I decided to assume the sales responsibilities for this business. My first sales call was to a man named Waldo. On my way to his office, I was gripped with fear. This was something I had never done before, and just the thought of meeting Waldo was enough to raise my blood pressure and tighten my

muscles. Rationally speaking, I had no reason to feel this way, but the fear of rejection was real for me.

Then I remembered Josie. “What’s the worst that can happen when I face Waldo?” I thought. My fears began to subside, and the meeting

with Waldo turned out to be a piece of cake. I had perceived a danger that was not real, and my willingness to walk into the perceived danger proved this out.

Early in my career, I worked as a project manager for a company in Florida. Life was good. I liked my job, and the company liked me. One morning, my boss asked me to transfer to Pittsburgh, an opportunity that offered a promotion and a raise. Despite the upside, I was afraid. I didn’t know Pittsburgh, and I was comfortable in my job. I agonized for days before my boss called and demanded a response. With hardly a thought, I blurted, “I’ll take the transfer!” I was amazed at how quickly my fear subsided after that. Once again, confronting the perceived danger head-on turned out to be a victory strategy for me.

Fear of making mistakes is especially dangerous for business leaders. Rather than make a decision, they procrastinate. One common coping strategy is insisting on

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more and more information that is supposedly necessary to make the decision. This is actually just a way of putting the decision off while appearing to be diligent. Most decisions need to be made without having all the information. You will never have all the answers, so the only way to be successful is to recognize when you have enough information to make the decision – then make the decision. You might fail, but you cannot be afraid of this. Indecision can be costly; it causes people and organizations to miss out on great opportunities. We have experienced this, and we have seen our clients go through it. Chances are that you have, too.

In an uncertain world and a delicate economy, it's easy to see why most people are inclined to play it safe. But playing it safe has its own risks. If you never dare to fail, your success has a low ceiling. Besides, most people underestimate their ability to recover from failure, causing them to pass up valuable opportunities. The ability – indeed, the willingness – to fail big and fail often has marked the resumes of spectacularly successful people throughout history. “There was never any fear for me, no fear of failure,” said Michael Jordan. “If I miss a shot, so what?” It seems that the Weiden+Kennedy motto (“Fail Harder!”) and the Nike tagline (“he who makes the most mistakes, wins”) are on to something. Embracing the potential for failure often leads to outperforming more timid competitors.

OVERCOMING FEAR

Fear is usually a figment of one's imagination and can thus be overcome. The next time you are faced with fear, ask yourself the Josie question: *what's the worst that can happen?* As you speculate on the outcome, you will begin thinking constructively and planning specific actions. As you enter the “danger zone” and confront the fear, you will quickly ascertain whether the danger is real or perceived. Either way, you will build the confidence and discipline to continue to confront fears in the future.

Another way to conquer fear is to create a safety zone, an unshakable sense of worth based on facts. Recall your past successes. Review the accomplishments on your resume or corporate bio. Hang your awards where you can see them. If

you focus on your mistakes, they seem larger over time. If you remember your strengths and successes, you will see that you've done it before, and you can do it again. You might consider keeping a daily victory journal in which you record the positive accomplishments of each day. This victory journal can be a healthy source of confidence and perspective in times of fear.

A third way to conquer fear is to identify a goal that is greater than your fear. Most of us would hesitate to walk a high wire, but if you had to walk a high wire to save your child's life, nothing would stop you from trying. When the goal is important enough, fears become secondary – even forgotten.

When faced with fear, check your goal. Remind yourself why you do what you do. What is your higher purpose? As Apple CEO Steve Jobs asked an executive he was recruiting away from Pepsi, “Do you want to sell sugar water or do you want to change the world?” Not all goals are profound, but it can be very powerful and effective to invest some time

thinking about why your goals are worth pursuing. That feeling of conviction can brush fear aside.

Practice conquering fear by using fear itself as a spur. Set a goal to do one scary thing each day. Anything that makes you hesitate

counts. Log the results in your victory journal. This practice can help to rewire your brain over time.

I (Tom) had a client who was a lawyer. He experienced an almost paralyzing fear when confronting a complex case. To conquer this fear, I worked with him to develop a detailed process to follow every time he felt that fear creeping in. First, he committed to opening up a new case by simply looking at it but not doing anything else right away. That was a specific enough activity with no immediate requirements that he felt comfortable doing with any case of any size. Once he had done that, the case was no longer a mystery, so his fear of the unknown was gone. Second, he would outline a possible approach. That took care of his confusion. Third, he would list all of the expertise he would need for the case but that he himself did not possess. This prevented a lot of frustration. He's been using this system for four years now, and his fear is no longer an issue.

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COMMITTING TO ACTION

“I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it,” said Nelson Mandela. “The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.” Spend some time listing your fears and determining how you will confront them. In the big picture, there is little to lose and much to gain. Besides, what is the worst that can happen?

Ideas for Overcoming Fear

- Differentiate real danger from perceived danger.
- Ask the Josie question: *what is the worst that can happen?*
- Confront your fear head-on. Whatever you fear, there is something you can do to eliminate it.
- Recall past successes. This will build your confidence that you can confront the fear.
- Develop a goal that is greater than your fear.
- Deliberately seek fears to confront on a daily basis.
- Create a system to take you through complex problems where fear might otherwise stop you.

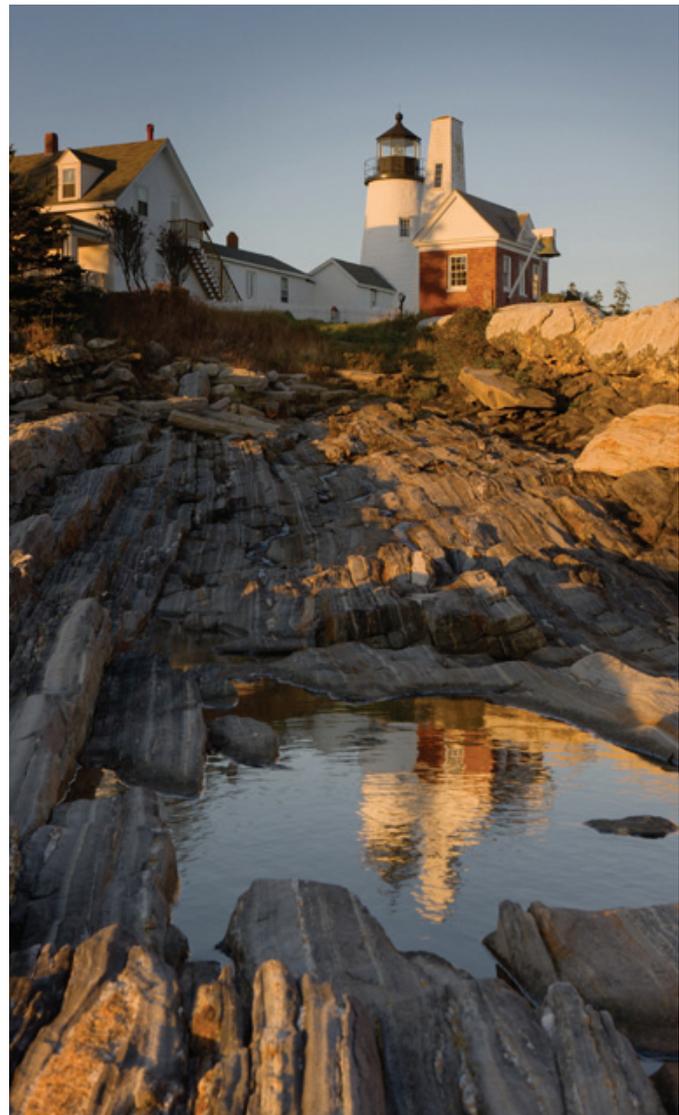


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