



Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It

BY GARY BURNISON

The mission was always found in a phone booth, a vending machine, a parked car or other mundane location. The tape recording that detailed “your mission, should you choose to accept it,” ended with the chilling warning that in the event of capture, all knowledge would be disavowed. With a puff of smoke, the tape self-destructed in 10 seconds.

As a boy growing up in Kansas, my favorite TV show was *Mission Impossible*. I loved the disguises and techno-gadgets, and the fact that you couldn’t always distinguish the good guys from

the bad guys at first. Watching that show, week after week, I wanted to grow up with my own “mission impossible” one day.

Flash-forward 40 years. Like every other leader I’ve met recently, as a CEO I face unprecedented levels of uncertainty, ambiguity and constant change that make every day a “mission impossible.”

Over time, leaders have periodically faced upheavals, from world wars to technological advancements that changed how we live and work. But today is different. During a recent two-hour conversation with former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, our wide-ranging discussion covered everything from globalization and geopolitics to the environment. Later, in a private conversation, he emphasized the uniqueness of these times—truly like none other in history.

The world is flat and borderless, yet also walled with protectionism. Change is everywhere: US interest rates, after an extended period at essentially zero, are rising. Within a deeply divided political climate, there are attempts to reform healthcare and revise tax laws. Unemployment is low, but wages are stagnant. Given that the average length of an economic cycle is just over five years, the current expansion in the US is undeniably in a late stage.

A year after the UK’s Brexit vote, Europe is still feeling the reverberations. France’s new president, Emmanuel Macron, has his hopes on revitalizing the European Union as being key to his country’s economy. German Chancellor Angela Merkel faces an election in September; despite her popularity, in today’s uncertain times, nothing can be taken for granted. In Asia, growth continues, but all eyes are on China’s economy. Geopolitical hotspots and terrorism fears erupt with unnerving frequency.

How can leaders accept the mission of coping with today’s conflicted reality?

The answer can be found in two timeless abilities that define leadership: to anticipate and to navigate. Anticipation starts with the reality of today, using the known to forecast the unknown of what’s likely to be beyond the horizon. It means projecting, having a Plan A and a Plan B—plus Plans C and D to cover the possible contingencies.

Fortunately, leaders don't have to go it alone. Just as *Mission Impossible* had its team that saved the world every week, as a leader you must rely on your team—people on the front lines with their fingers on the pulse of change. The best leaders, whether at the helm of companies or countries, know how to make anticipation a team sport by establishing an organizational culture that creates and elevates world-class observers.

Actively anticipating requires a change of thinking. Setting a strategy is not a once-a-year exercise. As I've said before, such arcane exercises inevitably come 11 months too late. Strategic thinking must be about decision-making and course-correcting in the midst of the storms and surrounded by the fog of uncertainty. And, all the while, leaders who are trying to set a long-term plan face intense demands from board members, shareholders and Wall Street for steadily improving results every quarter.

Navigation is the companion skill to anticipation. Navigating uses objectivity and clarity to observe and react to *what is*. It involves course-correction in real-time when the unexpected

occurs, whether an obstacle or an opportunity.

Together, anticipating and navigating require world-class agility that stretches the intellectual and strategic abilities of even the best leaders.

As a leader, you must engage all your senses, including your intuition. Rather than rely on

what you know, you must delve into what you don't—with insatiable curiosity that seeks to understand “why,” while also asking, “why not?”

Expand and alter your perceptions. What looks like an obstacle or an insurmountable challenge may be an opportunity in

disguise—if you are willing to look beyond the mask of the obvious.

This is the mission, impossible though it may seem. Although you do have the choice of whether to accept it, as a leader, your only real answer is “yes”—before the tape destructs in 10 seconds. ●

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