

## Leading Through Death, Disruptors, and Conflicting Demands

By Nancy Capistran, PCC, CPC

Most people like the idea of progress, yet many people resist the change component even to the point of ardently fighting against it. Life is full of complications and uncertainty. The sooner we realize, accept, and even tolerate that change is a constant, the more productive we will be in all aspects of our lives. I have found that more people than not tend to oppose the complexities of change as it is often associated with feelings of discomfort, difficulty, and pain, all of which can be put under the umbrella of fear of the unknown. What is frequently overlooked is that change often brings with it opportunity. Flexing our bravery muscles allows us to gain and build awareness to embrace change and thereby create better outcomes.

The stress - before, during, and after - change impacts each of us differently. I have yet to meet a person who has a simple or easy life. There are those who have a polished facade, but when we peel back the top layer of their world, the truth presents itself. We all have hurdles in our lives no matter how much or how little we have.

A well established and respected law firm was referred to me by a business friend a few months after the founding partner, a healthy and fit 53-year-old, died suddenly. This loss was devastating, not only to his family and friends, but to everyone who had worked with him for many years. The unexpected death of the primary rainmaker, a man who had grown his dream into a thriving business, was a shock that paralyzed the entire firm to its core. With the loss of their fearless leader, the gaping hole in the firm's day-to-day operations was extensive.

With the lightning speed of business these days, taking the time to forward think and plan for the unexpected does not happen as often as it should. Unfortunately, the partnership of seven, which abruptly became a partnership of six, had never done a strategic risk assessment. There was no crisis management plan or succession plan to provide support or guidance for a situation like this. The partnership agreement had some details, but not enough to provide a clear plan for immediate action towards operating the business the day after the tragic event. The vision of the past needed to rapidly pivot if the firm wanted to navigate successfully out of this dire state.

The partners and staff had barely mourned their loss before they had to face the reality of the volume of legal cases requiring immediate attention. With my support, they were able to carry on with business as close to usual as they could. I needed to remain sensitive to their loss while simultaneously balancing the expeditious resolution of the acute legal needs of their clients. Due to the extreme pressure on the remaining partners, the once healthy culture became compromised with fear due to the inordinate level of stress. Ultimately, exhaustion caused low quality work and missed deadlines. The ripple effect

burdened all of their stakeholders as the entire team struggled on many different levels. The journey forward was bumpy.

It wasn't long before the culture of the firm became toxic. The loyalty of the past was no longer a touchstone. There was an undercurrent of people who scrapped their allegiance and were resolved to leave the firm. It was at this point that I had an in-depth, professional, heart-to-heart separately with each of the partners with the goal being to gain clarity on their commitment for a future with this firm. Surprisingly, they were all on board and ready to make some laser shifts to gain more favorable momentum. They were ready to implement a new strategy that could take the business forward. Every day, these new leaders showed up as agents of positive change by focusing on what was most important to the firm and to their clients. They were able to regain the appreciation and strong bonds of the past while also being able to thrive through adversity in a way that they never thought could be possible. To this day, they continue to lead with an enhanced commitment and a revitalized sense of purpose towards what the future can hold.

In times of extreme stress, when we are feeling the most overwhelmed, it is vitally important to focus our energy on the key drivers for our success. For this firm, the radically fast-paced focal points were on enhancing the strategic plan, improving systematic and repeatable business processes, safeguarding employee retention, honing quality client relations, mending their brand recognition, and rebuilding their competitive advantage.

People need to take an appropriate amount of time to grieve, but there can also be a tipping point where getting stuck or staying busy thinking about the unfortunate turn of events only compromises our progress. While there were many elements of this engagement that required the expertise of grief counselors, those services were handled separately. My specialty, and the primary reason that my services were requested, was to "be the glue" to help save this firm. I was referred into this unforeseen crisis by a strategic partner who had an appreciation for the value that my coaching and advisory skills could provide.

The success of this firm hinged on the personal transformation of its partners. Their highly dynamic, complex, and chaotic situation, combined with their emotional numbness, required them to unite and quickly gain clarity over their domain. Cultivating positive new behaviors to support the immediate client demands was the top priority. These leaders needed an accelerated attainment of adaptive leadership skills coupled with increased self-awareness and more effective communication competencies. Understanding and aligning the objectives of the business with the development needs of the entire team was mission critical.

Now, in post-crisis, they have experienced significant growth due to a number of important lessons that have been learned. Through our collaborative work, they exceeded their expectations. They persevered through their darkest days and created actionable intelligence. They are utilizing these transferable skills to focus on continuity of operations to best support the firm's prosperous future.



**About the Author:** Nancy Capistran is a best-selling author, an award-winning, internationally certified executive coach, motivational speaker, and trusted advisor. She is Principal of [Capistran Leadership, LLC](#), and [Crisis Interception, LLC](#). Nancy's best-selling international leadership book: [Open Your Eyes and LEAD](#) shows readers how to become a positive force in the world and how to balance and manage omnipresent tensions while striving for leadership excellence. Capistran shares inspirational stories and advice from her 30+ year career to help both seasoned and emerging leaders develop intentionality while maintaining their core values and beliefs even when life's pressures dictate otherwise.