

Leading Through Crisis
A memoir about personal crisis and the steps taken to keep going.
By, Geneau M Thames

"So...have you been feeling tired lately?"

That was the question my doctor asked me as we sat down to review my annual bloodwork in July of 2017. My answer, snarky as always, "I'm a mother of three children, I've been tired for 17 years (the age of my oldest child at the time), of course I'm tired." Subsequent tests confirmed that I had Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML) - one of the most aggressive types of leukemia, with a poor survivability rate. A little over 24 hours later, I was admitted into Johns Hopkins Hospital, where I spent the next 33 days ongoing aggressive chemotherapy. Eventually, I received a bone marrow transplant that took over six months (which felt like years!) to materialize put me into full remission.

We experienced an array of emotions, seemingly all at once - utter shock, dismay, fear, and turmoil towards not only the initial diagnosis, but for the obstacles that lie ahead for us when we reviewed the treatment plan. My husband, the absolute love of my life, and I huddled together in that doctor's office after we received the news. We hugged, shed many tears, and then there was resolve - to lead our way out of this crisis.

So - How do you lead through hardship?

When I say lead, I'm referring to our personal lives. We have three children to care for, a house to maintain, and jobs that allow us to provide for our family, to keep. Ultimately, these skills transitioned into our work lives making us better leaders, but to get there, we needed to lead our family first. Despite our best efforts, there were failed attempts at "surviving" (for lack of a better word"). But, over time, countless achievements were celebrated. These are a few ways we made it through.

Maintain Composure

Maintaining composure is much easier said than done. When we told our oldest son (17 at the time) about my diagnosis, he dropped to the floor in disbelief and was simply heartbroken. Candidly, so were we, wanting to crumble with him. But he needed us to show him that this, too, would work itself out. So, I picked him up off the floor and told him that everyone and everything would be okay. I reminded him of our struggles together throughout his life and this was just another that we would conquer. I asked him (looking back, quite unfairly) to be strong for his younger siblings (ages 11 and 8) and to serve as an example for them. He needed a task, one thing he could do during this journey.

As leaders, composure during strife is crucial. It provides a steadfastness that reassures and buoys us to complete the goals set before us. It sets a precedent in our shared journey for those we direct.. It's easy to surrender to the emotions of the moment, and oftentimes, no one would begrudge us for doing so, but any challenge paired with lack of composure will not be solution-focused. Maintaining composure during difficult times takes effort but provides those around us not only with a shared sense of peace but also the determination to keep going.

Prioritize and Be Selfish

To heal during times of illness, you simply must be selfish and prioritize that which is most valuable to you. For us, it is our nuclear family. We needed to ensure that their needs were being met and provided for so I could focus on my recovery. For you, it may be something else. Regardless, it's imperative to prioritize your needs and then leverage your relationships with family, friends, and people you trust to help you with that which you cannot, and simply should not, do yourself. What seems like such a simple concept can be detrimental to the healing process when you allow outside factors to concern you. As leaders, when we prioritize the tasks we should be doing and delegate those tasks to folks who are better equipped, we lead with more efficiency and effectiveness.

Control What You Can and Lean into Everything Else

I think this is one of the most important and most difficult lessons one will learn in life. As an extreme control freak, this was just flat-out hard. I am Type A *to my core* and try to control everything I can in my sphere. I learned during my illness that there is no such thing as control. Your body will do what it is going to do. I let go, let the medicine, and, more importantly, the *experts in medicine* do their thing. Did I ask questions? Yes. Did I challenge them? Without a doubt. Did I work hard to try to make informed decisions about my treatment? Absolutely! Notwithstanding, I had to let go, make the best decisions I could at the time, and lean into the rest.

Candidly, as leaders, it's absurd and exhausting to try to control every variable. We know it isn't feasible, yet we continue to try to do so to gain outcomes in our favor. We end up stressed and overwhelmed. Instead, we should challenge ourselves and our teams to just be prepared. Make meticulous plans, develop information, and make educated decisions. When you've put in the work, lean into the result, knowing you put yourself and others around you in the best position for success. Leaning in doesn't mean that we are ill-prepared or uninformed. It means we've worked to develop plans and processes that can be trusted. The outcome may not be as we desired, and that is okay – sometimes, the result is better than anticipated.

Have Faith

The definition of faith is "firm belief in something for which there is no proof." For some, it is in a deity. For others, it is something completely different. For this conversation, it's about conviction. A sense of resolve so firmly rooted you become unshakeable during times of adversity. During my darkest days, and there were many, I honestly did not know if I would live, or what would happen to my children, my parents, and my husband. At times, I was crippled with overwhelming fear and anxiety, which led me to prayer. I prayed for the strength to endure. I'm not telling you to pray. It's your prerogative and could be a different path. I'm suggesting you gain conviction and resolve so you can stay the course when challenges arise. For me, I rely on prayer.

True leadership requires conviction - in our plans, people, and ourselves. If we have developed a strategic plan, a vision for the future, everything we do must positively impact the plan. The same holds true for our people. If we hire and properly train them for their role, we need to let them do their job and support them as we work together toward our collective goals. Most importantly, we need to believe in ourselves. When that imposter syndrome sneaks in and causes doubt, we need to be convicted of our abilities.

I leave you with this story. Geno Smith, former quarterback of the NY Jets and now starting quarterback for the Seattle Seahawks, talked about his journey to becoming an NFL starter nearly 10 years after he was drafted. He bounced from team to team hoping for his shot before landing in Seattle. During a sideline interview when asked what it took for him to persevere through setbacks and disappointments when it appeared everyone had written him off, he said "they wrote me off, I ain't write back tho."

We suffered so many disappointments waiting for a potential match on the National Bone Marrow Registry. Time and again, we were informed of a potential match, only to be disappointed. Every setback was gut-wrenching. I, too, believed that I had been "written off" at times. But even in the darkest of my moments, I refused to accept any other outcome. Remission was the only option. I did not write back. And with that backdrop in mind, when hardship and seemingly insurmountable challenges inevitably develop, follow me and Geno - "Don't Write Back."