



### **Letters on Leadership #8: Controlled and Uncontrolled Environments**

As leaders, we ply our trade in two types of environments: controlled and uncontrolled. A ***controlled environment*** is one where we control the variables: we “run the clock,” the location/duration of a drill, or the intensity of conditioning. In an ***uncontrolled environment*** there is an enemy out there trying to kill us, figuratively or literally (military combat operations).

***In training and practice, leaders should make their controlled environments seem uncontrolled.*** We should try and replicate game-time or battlefield conditions: shorten the shot clock, blast loud music, or have players execute when they are fatigued. In the military, we call this “stress inoculation.” Although we can never truly replicate the mental and physical rigors of combat, we train in controlled environments that are made as intense and stressful as possible. As an example, training scenarios are set up so soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines have to perform and execute tasks while dealing with sleep and food deprivation, extreme weather



conditions, and a lack of intelligence information, all while under intense pressure from their chain-of-command. “Train like you fight,” or rather, “practice like you play.”

By the same token, *leaders must make uncontrolled environments appear as controlled as possible*. This, however, is where The Program sees many leaders fail. They make an uncontrolled and chaotic environment even more uncontrolled and chaotic. Behind in a game, they yell and scream in the locker room at halftime, they argue with their assistant Coaches over the headsets, they slam their clipboard down on the ground in fits of rage. Panic spreads like wildfire. Players try to do “too much”, arguments break out, trust breaks down. Any hope of a comeback is dashed.

This isn't to say that leaders can't yell, use harsh words, or show their passion. However, we need to ask ourselves “Is my passion *mission-based*, or is it *emotion-based*?” Maybe a fiery speech at half time is what is needed to light a fire under a team after a lackluster performance. Maybe a focused show of passion will inspire an athlete. This is mission-based passion. Too often, though, we see leaders with emotion-based passion. They yell and scream, not because it will help the team's performance, but because they are angry, frustrated, and emotional. Emotion-based passion portrays panic.

There is no more uncontrolled and chaotic environment than combat. One of the most uncontrolled environments in which I have had to operate was during the Battle of Najaf in 2005. My platoon, along with a few others, was called to respond to an attack on an Iraqi police station by insurgent forces. Upon arrival, enemy gunfire was sporadic. Hopefully most people reading don't know this (or at least haven't experienced it first hand), but gunfire sounds different depending on whether it is going out or coming in. Gunfire going out is marked by a big bang sound, just like in the movies. A high pitched whining noise means gunfire is coming in your general direction. However, when you hear a “CRACK,” that means a bullet just missed you. As we moved towards the enemy position we heard bullets “whining” all around us and more than a few “cracks”. We reached a traffic circle and I dismounted my scouts from the vehicle to “clear” it (i.e. to make it safe). At this point in the war, the enemy didn't have very accurate indirect fire (mortars, artillery, and rockets) capabilities. However, these guys knew we were coming and had



already aimed in on the traffic circle. The world exploded. I don't know a more eloquent way to put it. It was like being battered by a tidal wave of screaming, smoke, sound, and fire. When the mortar barrage lifted, I knew I had to call it in. Every instinct I had told me to pick up the radio and scream, to cuss like Yosemite Sam, to throw my weapon down, to panic. However, I knew that would be the worst thing I could possibly do to my Marines. Panic spreads like wildfire. Instead, counter to my instincts and the voices in my head, I took a deep breath and spoke over the radio "Palerider, this is Warpig. Taking Fire. Moving Position." I did my best to sound just like I did while training in beautiful Southern California. My Marines were incredibly tough, smart, and courageous. All I needed to do was give them confidence and let them loose to do what they had been trained to do.

We ply our trade in two type of environments: controlled and uncontrolled. To simulate the stresses of competition we make our controlled environments *seem* uncontrolled. When we find ourselves up against an intelligent, cunning, aggressive enemy and chaos threatens to rule, we present the image of a controlled environment, give our team confidence, and as always...

Attack!

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