It can’t get any worse

A personal experience placed in a wider context

During early June of last year I was sailing across the North Sea at night after a couple of days in Oostende. It was a bit windy so I had reduced our sail area for a more comfortable ride home. Suddenly there was a bang! The forestay and genoa had broken away from the bow and was flapping furiously all over the place. To non-sailors, this is the thick wire at the front of the boat that helps keep the mast in place and holds up a big sail. I’ll spare you all the expletives but within a few minutes I was astride the bow of the boat in quite a rough sea trying to lasso this bit of miscreant rigging. Although I was wearing a life jacket and safety harness, there were a few times when I thought the power of this very uncontrollable sail was going to sweep me overboard. My crew were doing a sterling job keeping the boat on a steady course. I was about 75% successful but we had better control. Things surely couldn’t get any worse.

The forces of nature can often conspire against you during adversity. Whilst I had better control it was not enough in heavy weather and an adverse tide. We were heading for a very busy shipping-lane and beyond that a sandbank that did not require my presence. I’d already informed the Coastguard of my predicament but actually ASKING for help was, for me, a big step.

Stepping outside the situation, it was a no-brainer. Of course I needed help. I was shattered, I had great difficulty in controlling the boat and I had run out of ideas. The Walton-on-the-Naze Lifeboat turned out at about 4am that morning. One of the crew came aboard, assessed the problem and I’m glad to say experienced some difficulty as well! But we got sorted and we were safety escorted out of danger.

A repeat expedition was successfully completed a couple of weeks ago - uneventful apart from a fabulous visit from a pod of dolphins.

Because my brain works in peculiar ways I tried to put my personal experiences alongside recent events and try and make something of it. I think when things ‘kicked off’ in Tottenham some people said, ‘this is pretty bad, but things can’t really get any worse’. Setting aside the whys and wherefores, I suspect that there was information ‘out there’ to indicate the contrary. But people didn’t see it. Why?
One element of Risk Management is Scenario Planning. Far from crystal ball gazing, this enables inputs from many internal, external, global and local issues; and we think about them, what it could mean and more importantly what the response should be?

With all the best intelligence, things might have looked just okay in Tottenham but put that next to an ever pervasive social network such as Facebook and Twitter, deprivation, the depressing financial news, government retrenchment that we haven’t really felt yet, then you don’t need much to happen before things get out of control.

In his book *Cables from Kabul* (my summertime read), Sherard Cowper-Coles was lamenting the general downward trend in Afghanistan,

> ‘Such was the turnover of officials and pace of business that everyone fell into the same trap: of substituting acquaintance for knowledge, activity for understanding, reporting for analysis and quantity for quality’

He was determined to put that right but I think his observation could be tested here, and indeed, in your business.

Thankfully many of us are a long way from Afghanistan but if we stop and think, we should see the rather obvious connections in the world around us and how they could impact. But thinking takes time. Management of Risk and Business Continuity Planning will give you a *heads up* in this very *heads down* business environment. If you are waiting for a Japanese part for your car you will know what I mean. I don’t know the Japanese for ‘things can’t get any worse’, but I’m sure they said it. And regrettably it did.

Yes I did check my boat rigging, and many other things, before my last trip. Make sure you check yours.