



Overview

This book is about three important words: *coping*, *calamity* and *leader*. Each of these has a dictionary definition and each is also very specific to the context within which they are used and subject to the perceptions of those who use them.

“**Coping**” is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as to *contend evenly, grapple successfully*. It is about recovery, about making it through the difficult times or over the obstacles. Implicit within coping, is the notion of *survival*, of being able to continue.

“**Calamity**” is defined as *adversity or deep distress*. This is a highly subjective notion and the amount of distress differs per person as to whether they would then classify an adverse event as a calamity. It's a personal matter.

So who is a “**Leader**”? This book is based on the premise that we are all leaders. Some of us hold formal positional roles that we use to define ourselves as leaders, for others it is more subtle. Everyone in this book has demonstrated leadership within his or her community. Every person in this book is an ordinary leader – for whom ordinary, and sometimes extra-ordinary, mishaps happen. There are many books that cover the high profile leaders in the world. Our aim is to share with you what happens when every day leaders meet every day calamities, and how they cope with them.

And who are these everyday leaders? Each chapter in this book is an account of a calamity as experienced by a member of the Rotary Club of Aylesbury in England. This book demonstrates the breadth of membership in Rotary throughout the world and depth of the experience of members, as well as their commitment to share their stories so others may learn.

In “**Small things matter**”, Dr Roger Bodley tells his story of leaving a needle exposed and the ensuing injury sustained by a cleaner. He learnt how small things can have a huge impact and how inspection and protocols can reduce error rates, but not avoid them entirely. He also experienced the dilemma of whether to own up to the fact that he was the person who left the needle on the counter.

Des May shares his experience in the second chapter, “**Rallying round**” when, as Head Teacher, part of his school was burnt down in an arson attack. His story shows how calamities can bring out the best in communities and the importance of keeping “the show on the road”.

In “**Big events, big decisions**” James Frost explains the importance of being decisive and taking business risks and coping even when you have little control over the circumstances – the circumstances? They were war...

Regulations and laws are one area that if not followed correctly can turn into a calamity. In “**Legal liabilities**” John Hardwick shares his advice, with hindsight, that small businesses should seek advice as early as possible if there is a legal problem looming, and to take as many precautions as possible to avoid the problem getting worse.

Going into business with family member can be fraught for many reasons. In chapter five, “**Family Matters**” Ralph Followell shares his experience of what happened to his dental practice when he was forced to leave his premises. He learnt about the importance of firming up on agreements and expecting the unexpected.

Not all calamities are reserved for commercial business. A Rotarian's surprise at finding out that the national charity he had just joined as an executive member was on the brink of becoming bankrupt despite what looked like a healthy profit, is told in “**Charities; cash counts**”. The special ending in this tale results in the award of the Paul Harris Fellowship Medal.

“**Overblown**” is a story about how a pharmacy picked up a sideline selling wheelchairs that nearly destroyed the business. John Vooght shares his lessons about sticking to the knitting, knowing when to let go and the appreciation that sometimes competition is a good thing.

The mystery “Mr X” describes how he felt when he discovered a chisel was on the loose in a prison in “**A “locky” business**”. Here the lessons were to focus on the small issues, vigilance and the importance of quick and focused action.

Roger Simmons experienced redundancy at an awkward age, forty-eight, and he shares his reflections on how he coped with it in “**Gaining from losing**” in chapter 9. He encountered ageism and went through the modern process of downshifting.

“**Risky business**” takes us into health care again, with Dr Helen Falcon reflecting on what she learnt when a bottle of water was accidentally replaced by something a lot more harmful. She learnt about the importance of listening and feedback, the necessity of fixing what can be fixed and to recognise the limitations of formal controls.

Finding the root cause of a calamity can be tricky and in chapter 11, “**Spilt milk**”, Des Brazier explains what happened when some foul smelling milk turned up at his processing plant and how they went about working out what had gone wrong.

“**In the public eye**” is a story about the difficulties of working for local government where all the business has to be conducted in public. Roy Collis explains what he encountered when presenting for modernising the County library services.

The death of a colleague and friend is one of the most significant calamities. In “**The importance of pause**”, John Guest reflects on the events leading up to the death and his own role in it and how he coped. This chapter reviews the topic of stress and its impact.

Ian Bond brings this book to a conclusion with a short and lighthearted story called “**Rain or Shine**”. We learn here about the importance of being prepared, especially for inclement weather, and the usefulness of humour as a means of coping with calamity.

As this book unfolded some themes came to light as common amongst all those who shared their stories. It seemed that it was easier to share the stories and reflect on them as time had passed. The more recent the event, the less easy it was to contemplate what happened and to identify the lessons. As a result, many of the stories in this book date back to earlier days in the careers of those who provided them.

It appears as though most of the calamities had an ‘*escalation*’ effect. Whilst each one was in its own right an adverse event, most of them, if not nipped in the bud, would become even worse. The *speed of reaction* to a crisis differed significantly according to the context and circumstance, as well as personal preference. Some individuals suggested that unless they had made a very speedy response they would have been worse off. In contrast, others said it was important to move slowly and not make any rash decisions.

All the contributors to stories in this book are characterised by an element of personal grit. Stepping up and sharing a personal and very real calamity to a world-wide audience is not to be under-estimated. It has taken them commitment, courage and humility – in themselves, all great characteristics of leaders who survive calamities.

“Coping with Calamities; Survival Strategies for Leaders” by Sarah W. Fraser, 2004, Kingsham Press
sales@kingshampress or contact@copingwithcalamities.com or sfraser881@aol.com