

CHAPTER 4

IMPROVISE, ADAPT AND OVERCOME TO ACCOMPLISH YOUR MISSION

BY ZACK VISCOMI

*If you find yourself in a fair fight – You didn't plan
your mission properly.*
~ David Hackworth

It was cold. And when I say it was cold, I mean it was really, really cold. It was so cold that 60% of my body was in a sleeping bag standing on a platform, while my head and upper body were sticking out of the top of a truck. Granted, it probably wasn't less than 42 degrees Fahrenheit, but this was the desert – it wasn't supposed to be this cold. There shouldn't have been frost on the trucks, yet here I was sitting in the turret leading a convoy toward Ramadi and I was shivering.

This particular story begins in early January 2010, and we were well into the coldest months in the Al Anbar Province of Iraq. I was a part of the 6th Motor Transport Battalion, a Reservist Battalion made up of locations across the US. We were the last

Marine Battalion to be in Iraq as the Marine Corps presence was being reduced as part of the withdrawal process initiated by President Obama.

We had already been in country since August and operating across the western half of the country, from Ramadi, Fallujah, and Baghdad out to the Syrian border. I was the lead machine gunner on our convoys and our platoon (First Platoon) was tasked with providing security for third party nationals (truck drivers from neutral countries) and KBR drivers (civilian contract truck drivers from the US). We relieved an M.P. unit if I remember correctly. My MOS, or military occupation, was Motor Transport, yet I didn't drive a truck, MRAP or HUMVEE 'outside the wire' a single day I was deployed. I was a machine gunner and the lead gun truck for 90% of the deployment.

This particular night, we had returned to Ramadi where a government building, which we were at a week before, was hit by two Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIED). Our mission was to provide security on the major roads and allow no one to pass while repairs were made to the defensive structures and barriers around the building.

My truck was parked facing down a major throughway, but there was no traffic at this time of night. It was obvious we were there, but we were in total blackout (no lights). With my NVGs, I could tell that there was small arms fire (SAF) coming in the direction of my truck, seemingly, from an alley on my right. I couldn't make positive ID on where the SAF was coming from, so, I remember yelling through my turret to the sergeant sitting in the passenger seat, "Hey 'sarnt' I think someone is shooting at me."

My sergeant responded, "Did it hit you?"

"No." I replied.

“Well, let me know when it does.” he said. And that was the end of the conversation.

I remember shrugging my shoulders in the moment. He had a good point. There was nothing we could do until something actually went down. Thankfully, it never did. However, I have had many years to think back on that instance and reflect on the power of those few words we exchanged that night.

In the moment, his response was comical. In fact, for a long time after, I would retell this moment as a funny story to sum up the entire deployment. However, as I matured and have had the time to think more about this interaction, I realized that there were many fundamental principles at work. Unbeknownst to the sergeant and myself, this short conversation had deeper implications that not only harkened back to our training, but to his experience having been in battle before, and what it means to be on a mission, or rather ‘Mission-Driven.’ Here are a few of the Principles I learned from that night:

Every plan is a good one – until the first shot is fired.

~ Carl Von Clausewitz

Principle 1: Improve, Adapt and Overcome

Improvise, Adapt and Overcome is the unofficial slogan of the United States Marine Corps and a fundamental principle to being mission-ready, no matter your circumstance. At Celebrity Branding Agency, we talk about working with ‘Mission-Driven CelebrityExperts®’ because it is the people who are known for being experts in their field (CelebrityExpert®), not just known, and not just expert, who are able to take their businesses to the next level. However, it is the mission-driven part of that which really makes a difference in an entrepreneur, person, or a professional’s ability, to achieve success.

It is easy to think of ‘mission-ready’ as knowing and executing

the plan to perfection. While this is a necessary step in the preparation for and fundamental to the success of many missions, it's the ability of the operator(s) to be well-trained, well-educated, and well-equipped so they are capable of improvising in the face of the inevitable surprises and unexpected turns that arise outside of the predetermined plan. It's their well-rounded knowledge and understanding that allows them to be adaptable to their environment and utilize the resources they have around them to continue and complete the mission.

Improvise: To improvise is the use of one's imagination and instinct to develop a new plan in the wake of an unexpected situation or emergency that renders the original plan irrelevant.

Adapt: To be adaptable is the ability to assess an issue or obstacle in addition to the resources you have available in order to fashion a new solution or a more suitable use of something to fit the current circumstance allowing for further progress.

Shannon Lee in her book, *Be Water, My Friend*, discusses her dad's philosophy about life and martial arts. Her dad, being the one and only Bruce Lee, was a life-long student and spent just as much time training his mind as he did his body. One of his foundational tenets was to be like water – to be fluid, flexible, and ready, but also relaxed. It is this same philosophy that is embodied within this principle to *Improvise, Adapt, and Overcome*.

She tells a story of a fighter who was being interviewed on TV about how he was going to win the fight. He laid out the exact plan to the reporter in great detail. How he was going to respond to his opponent and in which ways and at what times. He had it all perfectly orchestrated and was ready to execute his well thought-out and practiced plan.

Shannon knew, immediately, he was going to lose the fight,

and, sure enough, he did. Why? We are taught in school and in life that being prepared and having a plan – and executing that plan – is the key to success. Structure and order are instilled in us from the moment we are born. In many ways this is for our own good, and beneficial to our wellbeing as we learn how the world works. But it also puts undue pressure on our ability to achieve from a very young age. ‘The Plan’ is for us to behave, go to school, get good grades, go to a respectable university, get a job, start a family, have 2.5 children, and retire in Florida.

The reality is that reality always throws us curveballs, and it doesn’t matter what ‘plan’ you have, something is going to disrupt it. You can’t plan for something like the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It was something that just happened to the world, and changed all of our lives in one way or another. Many good businesses closed, jobs were lost, people were struggling. However, we also saw the improvisation and adaptability of others. New businesses started, the many mission-driven CelebrityExperts® that I work with found new ways to engage with their audience. If they had in-person consultations, they quickly learned how to do them virtually. Some people pivoted directions altogether, but because of their mission to help more people and live the life they wanted, they did not allow this unplanned catastrophe to keep them from continuing toward their objective.

In the case of the aforementioned fighter, the dependence he put on his plan did not allow him to adapt to his opponent, so, he continually tried to force his plan on his current circumstance. It was because of his inability to improvise and adapt that he was not able to overcome. And the same is true in our lives and businesses.

Planning is a crucial step in making sure that you are prepared. But in the words of the 34th President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, “In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.”

What do you do when faced with something you did not plan for? How do you respond?

When situations arise, do not be discouraged, you have all you need within to overcome the challenge. Stay focused on your mission and don't be afraid to improvise and adapt so you can overcome.

*The wise adapt themselves to circumstances as
water molds itself to the pitcher.*
~ Chinese Proverb

Principle 2: Give Up Control Without Losing Control

When I told my sergeant what was happening, inside I knew there was nothing I could do. It was completely out of my control because our rules of engagement (ROE) were clear: You must make positive ID before returning fire and I could only respond in like force. In other words, I couldn't just open fire with my truck mounted .50cal machine gun at someone who was lobbing SAF in my direction.

The truth was I felt out of control, and I wasn't sure what to do. Frankly, I didn't feel like getting shot that night – it was too cold to deal with that. This was not the only time that I felt out of control during this deployment but it is a good example of what it means to give up control without losing it.

There are many studies that have been conducted on both animal and human subjects and many of these studies show that the need for control is innate. However, is control just an illusion? These studies also found that our perceived control is based on our ability to have a choice. We are inclined to choose the route that awards us additional choices, rather than one that does not, even if the result is the same. In many instances, the route that requires more choices also requires the expenditure of more energy, yet this is the path most often taken.

Our instinct is to want control over lives and circumstances. People who want control over their lives are often more driven toward success and usually achieve it. To be mission-driven in life and in business requires some level of control – to make choices that will lead to the outcome you desire, which leads you toward your final objective. We all define success differently, but we all believe that choice is the ticket to get us there.

So, what happens when we feel we do not have a choice? We feel out of control and ‘backed into a corner.’ When our brain senses us losing our perceived control, we are often kicked into a fight-or-flight response, and this is no place to be making any decisions. You know that feeling in your chest you get that rises in us from the pit of your stomach. It’s in these moments that we must reassess where we are and remember, no matter the situation, we always have a choice. Even in moments where we feel there is only one option, the reality is that there is always another. While sitting in that turret, I had a choice. I could remain there focusing on my sector of fire and keeping the people behind me safe; I could also return fire and break the ROE to try and scare off whoever was firing and run the risk of a court martial, but still have my life; I could also have gotten inside the truck, where there was no risk of being shot, but also put the lives of many others at risk.

If we believe that we do not have a choice in any situation (as adults), we make ourselves the victim, and start to blame our circumstances for why we are not able to achieve the goals that we desire. I do not have the time to go into a full psychological breakdown of how and why this affects us negatively, but suffice it to say, that when we are put into situations that we cannot control, but are on a mission, we are making the choice to push forward, despite the rising uncertainty.

In that moment on the truck, I made the choice to remain at my post and ensure the safety of those behind me and in my truck so we could complete the mission we set out to accomplish. If

I would have ducked inside the truck, who knows what would have happened. Probably nothing, but because the mission was more important I gave up control of my safety, without losing control on how that would be accomplished within the context of the mission objective.

As the Chinese proverb stated, water, although it gives up control of its shape to the mold of the container, it does not lose itself in the process. While we may have to bend and flow and give up control in a situation, it does not mean that we lose all control over the outcomes or who we are as a person. We must be willing to conform, like water, but ready to flow free toward our goals once the moment allows it.

It is possible for the same thing both to be and not to be.

~ David Hume

Principle 3: Perception Is Reality, But Doesn't Make You Right

When we are going about our lives and facing different circumstances that disrupt our plans, requiring us to improvise, adapt, and relinquish some control, we must ask ourselves one more question:

Is this really a threat, or is it just a perceived threat?

My sergeant's question "Did it hit you," and subsequent response, "Well, let me know when it does," brings this question to light. Sitting in that turret it seemed like the SAF was a threat or had the potential to become a greater threat. I was taking all my assumptions of what I know about war, about people shooting at me, about how I should or shouldn't respond in this situation and applying those assumptions to my unidentified pseudo-assailant. My inability, on my own, to determine the imminence of this threat hinged on my own assumptions as well as my lack of experience. It wasn't until I said something to my sergeant that it all became clear.

I did not need to respond or do anything about this perceived threat, it's not until it became a real threat that it would require my attention and action. While perception is our reality, it is merely our interpretation of reality. If you are sitting across the table from someone with the number 9 between you, while it is a 9 to you, it is also a 6 to the person on the other side. Who is right? Neither is right, or both are right depending on how you look at it, but if you dig a little deeper, we will have to ask who drew the number and what did they intend it to be? That is the actual reality of that number, despite our perspective on it.

In the end, the choice is always up to you, but don't be afraid to seek out the advice and wisdom of others who have been there before you. Don't be distracted by assumptions and fears and allow them to control you. Give up your control, but don't lose it. Be flexible, improvise, adapt and you will overcome.

*Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless, like water
Put water into a cup, it becomes the cup
Put water into a teapot, it becomes the teapot
Water can flow or creep, drip, or crash
Be water my friend.
~ Bruce Lee*



About Zach

For over 20 years, Zack Viscomi has shown repeated success in leadership as well as business development, branding, operations, and sales. Zack has worked with hundreds of entrepreneurs and professionals all around the world in the development of their CoreStory as well as teaching the power of The Business Trifecta®, the proven system behind business growth, and providing the tools needed to live a life of Joyful Impact and Significance.

Zack is the President of Celebrity Branding Agency and Integrator of DNA Media. He is a Best-Selling Author and has been featured in *USA Today*. He has also been seen on *ABC*, *NBC*, *CBS*, and *Fox* affiliates around the country. As an Ambassador for the Global Entrepreneurship Initiative at Carnegie Hall, he presented on stage about the importance of story for businesses and how we all have a story to share.

Whether it's developing new processes, hiring, training, and implementing technology to help a service and repair company post profitable quarters after continually experiencing net losses, or developing a system for the accounting department to decrease another company's receivables by over 70%, Zack is passionate about helping people succeed, while becoming the best versions of themselves.

Zack also enjoys mountain biking and spending time with his wife, Alli, and their three children, Scout, Aries, and Poppy – not to forget their two dogs: a boxer/ridgeback/pitbull mix named Miley, and a mini-pug named Mona.

Learn more at:

- ZackViscomi.com
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