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One False Step

“What is it that’s not exactly water, and it ain’t exactly earth?”
—*Blazing Saddles* (1974)

We were on vacation, relaxed and unguarded, on a wooded hike in the Florida Keys. I noticed a break in the brush where a path led to a lovely beach straight out of a Caribbean travel brochure, Windx-blue waters beckoning. “Let’s try that,” I suggested to my girlfriend and approached what looked like narrow footprints in thick mud. They seemed like horse hooves, which puzzled me, but I moved forward anyway... straight into disaster.

The first thing I remember was a sickening sound of suction, followed by my feet sinking in slowly, past my ankles. The more I pulled, the more I descended. “It’s quicksand!” I warned my girlfriend, but it was too late. She was stuck, too, amazed she couldn’t get out. It’s true: The harder you fight to get out of this stuff, the more you go down. Then it dawned on me: We were in the middle of nowhere, where we hadn’t seen anyone, in a place full of crocodiles waiting for idiot prey like us.

All we can hope for as leaders is to make decisions that turn out for the best, for our company and colleagues. We can’t be afraid to make them when we see an opening, whether it’s to adopt a new strategy, test a product, or just spot a path to a beach paradise. Doing nothing can backfire. But as we reach for opportunity,

we need to do so with caution. We can’t let our guard down. Sometimes over the course of months, sometimes in a matter of seconds, we need to balance consequence with reward.

It’s important to lead with confidence and a sense of ease. People don’t want bosses who overreact. Project a feeling of calm, but at no time let that projection reduce your awareness of your highly competitive or dangerous surroundings.

And yes, we must accept that we will make mistakes. Once, I interviewed and decided against hiring a promising reporter who went on to become the eventual editor in chief of ESPN. I also turned down a future Pulitzer Prize winner. Sure, I’d like to think most of my hiring calls have led to amazing storytelling in great publications. But to be honest, leadership is probably about getting it wrong a lot. And then recovering and accepting. Regret gets you nowhere.

Which is also true for getting stuck in quicksand. I snapped out of blaming myself—and seeing how the “h o o f -prints” were human, looked for a way out. My girlfriend, who was ahead of the game (as usual), eventually found a stick that a prior victim had left and pulled herself out. I dug with my hands into the thick muck, pulling out one heavy clump after another until I was free, maybe 10 exhausting minutes later.

Rattled, we decided to stay on and try to enjoy the hike. We survived. ▀

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