

**THE**  
*Resilient*  
**LEADER**

*HOW* **ADVERSITY** *CAN*  
**CHANGE YOU AND YOUR MINISTRY**  
*FOR THE* **BETTER**



**ALFRED ELLS**

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ALFRED ELLS

DAVID  COOK™  
*transforming lives together*

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# 1

## You Can Survive Conflict and Crisis (and Be Better for It)

*Adversity presents itself in many forms.... If a man does not master his circumstances then he is bound to be mastered by them.*

**Amor Towles, *A Gentleman in Moscow***

No one initially welcomes conflict and crisis, and I am no exception. I still remember the shock and anger and fear I felt twenty years ago when a tremendous crisis walked into my workplace.

A tall officer of the law approached my receptionist. “Is Mr. Ells available?” he asked. The receptionist notified me of the officer’s presence, and as I walked toward the front desk, I wondered why a policeman would want to see me. He asked for my ID, looked it over, and then served me legal papers.

Back in my office, I sat down to digest the contents of the summons. A former client was suing the clinic and her therapist, along with me, as I had worked as a supervisor on her case. I was stunned.

As the shock wore off, a flood of emotions rushed through me. First, I was deeply hurt. We had provided this client with thousands of dollars’ worth of free counseling. After all we had done for her, she was *suing* us?

Her betrayal felt personal, and I erupted in anger. *How dare she!*

Then fear kicked in. What did this mean for our future? Would the clinic survive? Would I be okay? What about my wife and kids? The other therapists?

Finally, I was just confused. What had happened? Why would she want to sue us?

You've probably experienced a storm or two in your life. Were you surprised by them, or did you see the dark clouds building on the horizon? Adversity often comes without warning. Bad news is shocking. Experts report that when we are faced with a painful or threatening circumstance, our first response is almost always shock and denial. Other emotions quickly follow, and our natural inclination is to fight back and defend ourselves.

At first I didn't know what to do after reading the summons, but I was pretty certain I wanted to defend myself and the clinic. I thought of calling the client to challenge her. I wanted to write a detailed rebuttal and share my thoughts about how her pathology had prompted her to do this insane thing. But in the end I was too shocked, hurt, and angry to respond immediately. Most of all, I was afraid.

I suppressed my feelings and continued through the day. I looked forward to the evening, when I could take time to process everything and determine what to do. But my thoughts kept returning to the idea of proving the client wrong and our clinic innocent. Raised with five brothers in an Arizona mining town, I had learned to fight back when someone attacked. We all tend to react to crisis based on imprints from our childhood. When facing conflict, I wanted to go to war against my accusers. That's what we did as kids. When brothers or friends punched us, we punched them back.

Now I was ready to fight to prove my innocence.

## **A TROUBLED NIGHT**

I lay awake most of that night, thinking and rethinking strategies. Early the next morning I went to my study and played worship music in an attempt to slow my racing thoughts. Soon my mind quieted, and I began to seriously pray. I shared with God my deep confusion and pain. I told Him I was hurt, angry, and scared. I poured out my heart and asked for guidance. After several minutes, a familiar inner voice seemed to say, “Call Al Ricciardi.”

Al Ricciardi is a lawyer friend, but I hadn’t spoken with him for years. It was unusual that his name would pop into my head during a time of prayer. I wasn’t even sure how to contact him, as he had changed law firms since our last interaction. Was this my imagination, or was God guiding my way?

I left my study, still thinking on it. Later that day, my wife, Susan, returned from Scottsdale Community College, where she was enrolled in their culinary arts program. “Look at what I found in my classroom,” she said as she held up a notebook someone had left behind. On the inside cover was a phone number and the name *Betsy Ricciardi*. She is Al Ricciardi’s wife.

*Wow!* I thought. *This must be God talking to me.*

I called the number in the notebook and reconnected with Al. He became our lawyer and coach for the pending lawsuit and, as it turned out, was exactly what we needed.

He challenged me not to follow my natural tendency, which was to fight back, but rather to respond to the accusations graciously and humbly. He helped me temper my responses and seek a better path to resolution. Al was God’s gift of guidance and wisdom for me throughout the process. The Lord used him to help me face up to and weather the storm.

## THE FIRST STEP IN RESPONDING TO A CRISIS

My crisis and those of many others have taught me a lot about how to respond to adversity. When facing crisis and conflict, it is essential that we resist our natural tendencies and not allow our emotions to control our actions. Fear and anger make for poor strategy when it comes to resolving conflict. Instead, we must respond in wisdom and grace, trusting that God is at work in the crisis. That's a big truth to embrace. So often we doubt His ability and desire to turn our crisis into a blessing.

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**IT IS ESSENTIAL TO RESIST OUR  
NATURAL TENDENCIES TO ALLOW  
EMOTIONS TO CONTROL ACTIONS.**

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Thankfully, in this instance I didn't go to war. Instead, I took the problem to God. I trusted His partnership and learned, through much prayer and wise counsel, how to face painful experiences with God as my guide. I also learned that wise, supportive counsel is an absolute necessity in times of crisis. In chapter 14 I will share more about what it means to have and utilize an ISSN—Intelligent Social Support Network—at such times. Whom you turn to for support and advice can either help you grow in wisdom and grace or diminish your chance of success.

I wish I had also realized from the beginning that God uses crisis and betrayal to help a leader grow and become more successful, not to punish or weaken the leader. I had always believed that He “causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who

## *You Can Survive Conflict and Crisis (and Be Better for It)*

are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). But that seemed different from “He will use betrayal, conflict, and crisis to bless me.” God used this tempest to mature me and teach me not only how to survive a difficult challenge but also how to thrive in its wake.

We grow into our best selves not when we avoid our problems but rather when we embrace them and work through them to resolution. In my counseling and coaching practice, I’ve walked alongside leaders through many times of testing. I’ve personally and professionally witnessed the pain, angst, and other consequences that come with a crisis. Some leaders respond well to the storms of ministry and thrive afterward. Many don’t. Either they don’t survive the conflict, or they survive but never seem to flourish again. These leaders failed to discover wisdom and growth in adversity. They were not resilient.

Most Christian leaders I know read books, listen to podcasts, participate in webinars, and attend conferences and seminars. They focus on hearing the Spirit’s leading, learning and adopting best practices, and developing organizational intelligence. They believe the gateway to their success lies in becoming more anointed or better educated or more skilled at their calling. These patterns and beliefs are all good. But rarely are leaders taught that one of the most important keys to success is learning how to survive and conquer the painful crises of leadership and life that inevitably come to us all.

### **THE SHADOW SIDE OF YOUR GIFTS**

When we pull back the curtain on the early lives of successful leaders, we frequently find a revealing story of how trying times were partly responsible for shaping their later success. Sometimes

a negative or painful episode can prove to be the exact catalyst a person needs to prosper and sustain excellence in leadership.

My own crisis helped me become a better leader when I discovered that my God-given gifts of compassion and connection had a shadow side that might be called codependence. It took this conflict to fully reveal a darker side of my gifting that God wanted to subdue. The shadow side of a person's gifting is often revealed only through adversity.

Throughout this book I will draw from the true stories of other leaders as well as my own challenges in confronting storms to provide insight as to what makes a leader successful and what doesn't. I will offer you counsel on how to prevent problems as well as respond to the traumas of betrayal, failure, and conflict. I will also outline practical steps of what to do and not do in these situations. If you will follow the wisdom herein, you can not only survive the challenges of leadership but also bounce back and thrive afterward. You can learn to be resilient.

Brad Henry, former governor of Oklahoma, once said, "Resilience is woven deeply into the fabric of Oklahoma. Throw us an obstacle, and we grow stronger."<sup>1</sup> Resilience plays a crucial role in our ability to thrive. What about you? Have the obstacles that have confronted you caused you to grow stronger? Growing in resilience is the first important step in preparing for the issues you will face as a leader. Resilience will help you refine your calling as a leader and sustain leadership excellence.