



## A Dozen Global Leaders – One Stubborn Cloud

BY CAROL BRADDICK

**Whether you were stranded or grounded at home after Eyjafjallajökull, April 2010 held up a mirror to how you find the upside amidst chaos, and how you lead others through uncertainty.**

TIME	DESTINATION	GATE#	STATUS
12:00	COPENHAGEN	---	CANCELLED
12:15	PARIS	---	CANCELLED
12:25	LONDON	---	CANCELLED
13:20	FRANKFURT	---	CANCELLED
13:45	ZURICH	---	CANCELLED
14:35	BRUSSELS	---	CANCELLED
15:00	MILAN	---	CANCELLED
16:25	KVIV	---	CANCELLED
16:55	MOSKOW	---	CANCELLED

How were you affected? How did you get back? Those were the questions in April 2010, as business leaders coped with an unexpected event beyond their power to control. As the meaning of the word cloud morphed from the latest in IT to a roving menace of volcanic ash, business leaders struggled to make their ways back—back home, back to business as usual. And some recovered in even stronger positions.

Thanks to a sample of a dozen leaders in global businesses, here is how they coped—or excelled—during this extraordinary disruption. These executives represent a mix of “the stranded” and the “grounded at home”. As promised, their names have been altered to preserve confidentiality. Leaders in the financial, pharmaceutical, professional services, and technology sectors, they were blissfully shielded from supply chain crises of fruit shipments rotting at far flung airports. Some leaders sought—and gained—an upside during April 2010; others restored business as usual.

### First, Panic Erupts

“My phone was ringing non-stop with people panicking. People were going to bits”, recalled Paul. “You could see people were in the grip of the need to keep moving—by any means at any cost—towards home, any destination that was something other than ‘being stuck’”, said Steve. And Bill, a Brit at US offices for a global meeting of his division, described being surrounded by “groups of panicky people feeding off each other”.

Little wonder, then, that some took the decision to stay calm, and separate from the fray. “I wanted to stay logical with all this going on around me”, explained one leader. Another leader relied on his recent experience of a mad rush out of Bangkok as political riots broke out: “I sought out my own taxi just to get away and make plans. I knew I would be more productive away from the group of people spinning each other up”.

### Then Waiting – with all Eyes on Leaders

“We were waiting—not just for planes to move again—but for guidance from management on communicating to our people”, said Jeremy. “And our people were waiting to hear from us. I spent a lot of my time checking in with people who were traveling. But I wasn’t in a position much of the time to give them guidance”.

Another leader, Wayne, communicated the essentials, but in a personal way: “I said what I could—that it was uncertain when I could return to Europe, and that we would go ahead with meetings and a global town hall via telecon. I added a light note to the



usual out of office email—that I was ‘stuck’ in Cape Town, with additional time to enjoy mountains and wine”. His out of office note was a hit, generating tongue-in-cheek requests for samples of South Africa’s finest.

### **Front Row Seats for Decision Making**

This was also a time to see just how some leaders made their decisions. One leader recalled seeing a GM announce how and when the team would attempt to travel. “We were all at the global meeting and he took the decision out of the hands of his team”. Thinking of his own approach under the circumstances, he noted that “while I would not have done it that way, I could see it worked well for that team at the time”.

Two leaders made their decisions real time—and for the first time—in front of a live audience. Directors who frequently disagree, they always agree on one thing: “We come out with one voice, and we stick to that one voice”. However, in April, the team gathered for the global conference saw just how open this debate became. Many were surprised by their first sight of their hashing it out. But both Directors thought it “was still a positive for them to see us get from a heated debate to a plan. And we did stick to plan”.

### **Staying in Touch, Staying High Touch**

As long as they had access to email and a mobile network, the stranded kept working. Heavy users of technology simply did more of the same: “Given how virtual we already are and how we’ve been using video conferencing and other collaboration technologies, I don’t think we were impacted too much”, observed Patrick.

Even those stuck in their holiday destinations were well equipped for unexpected extensions of their trips to the Caribbean and South Africa. “I always take both my PDA and my laptop on holidays because my mailbox would be too full when I return. I want to stay in touch”, one leader explained.

However, for some, the substitution of telecons for live meetings meant they missed out on something. While “it was nothing we couldn’t manage around”, said Jane, head of a PR team, “we missed a chance to celebrate—together with the client team—our successful completion of a major project”. Away for over 3 weeks, one leader noted that “you miss the ad hoc what-do-you-think conversations that happen in hallways; these help you tap into others’ ideas”.

There’s something else leaders tapped into during April: connections with colleagues. Laura, a Director in a technology company, was in touch with European regional managers returning home on dilapidated buses with few onboard facilities. She learned of just some of the irreverent names given to the buses and drivers. “This was great for teambuilding”, she explained, adding that those based in their usual offices showed concern they would be excluded from this ‘team effect’. One leader acknowledged being “secretly jealous of

**“The world is your office”, said one leader, whose team is based in Belgium and both the east and west coasts of the US.**



colleagues going on European road adventures”.

In one professional services firm, stranded Partners were welcomed at their closest local offices. “We constantly work at leveraging client relationships globally, encouraging a joint approach to clients”, said Adrian. “With dislocated Partners visiting local offices for as long as a week, there were many more discussions about mutual clients than would have occurred normally. This gave our CRM a great boost”. Looking back on April, Alastair observed that “it took something like this to push the behaviour change; maybe when faced with the uncertainty of that week, our people were more willing to give it a try”.

### **The Upside of Being on the Ground**

Just as the stranded found inventive ways to return home, those with unexpected spaces in their diaries found clever ways to get the most from Eyjafjallajökull. Taking advantage of the extended stay of a US executive in the UK, Patrick arranged several customer meetings to introduce his US colleague at important accounts. An executive with a leading global bank had the opportunity to meet face to face with colleagues he sees only infrequently. “These touch points smooth the way for us to work together”, he said.

The obvious option, for one UK leader stranded in the western US, was to travel east via the company’s main US offices. “I insisted”, he explained, “on combining the trip back with something useful; this turned out to be the fastest way back as well as a great chance to meet colleagues across the US. During this trek eastward, my kids and I chatted via webcam about volcanoes, clouds and planes”.

As the stranded in a professional services firm made temporary homes in their most local office in April, they had first hand exposure to the local market and the capabilities of their own teams. “This opened their eyes to the breadth of our firm globally, and how strong we are in so many markets”, said a senior leader.

Wayne, on balance, is “glad to have experienced this. I had more time to think about how we organize and execute strategy when I wasn’t running from meeting to meeting”. The HR Director in a major bank noticed that “those around were more focused in their meetings; there was a higher quality of conversation”.

Still others took an even more radical look at unexpected open time in their diaries. Resisting the comfort of an action packed day, Paul deliberately left his day open for two projects, both of which have early signs of payoff.

**“It would have been so easy to reload my diary with lots of meetings and calls. Instead, I took up longer term issues that I had been putting to one side”, said one leader.**



"I spent a rare uninterrupted three hours looking at the talent in our group. I pushed myself on points such as: Why is 'Joe Bloggs' not on this list? Are we challenging Marilyn enough? Who is ready for the next level?". Paul has since rewritten and socialised the talent plan. From these discussions, several moves—good moves—have been accelerated.

Paul then turned to an idea he had been considering—a new service that could potentially generate significant growth. "It's a much better use of me and my time to be thinking about an innovative way to achieve a leap in growth, versus plod along at annual increments". Like the updated talent list, this proposal is also hitting its stride.

### **Keepers from April 2010**

Besides bus and ferry receipts, what do these leaders plan to keep from April 2010?

In a team debrief, Jim's group identified several key views of customer and inventory information that should have been available at push of a button during April. Once as difficult to obtain as a Eurostar seat during April, access to this business critical information is now sorted.

Paul will remain grounded, at least more often. A weekly road warrior, he thought "others expected me to be here and there. But this was self imposed. I can make a bigger contribution by thinking more about our people and our business".

Much more challenging to keep, noted Jane, is "that sense of spontaneity and flexibility that comes alive in people when they are forced to improvise".

### **If It Happens Again?**

Preparing for future episodes of volcanic ash, Easy Jet plans to place infrared sensors in planes that detect ash clouds. Pilots can then fly around the nasty clouds.

For leaders there are no infrared sensors, just their own awareness of their reactions to uncertainty or live feedback from a trusted source. Like pilots avoiding stubborn clouds, leaders can avoid becoming entangled in the busyness of business. And lead themselves—and their teams—around nasty clouds and onto more promising routes.

**"I'm going to keep more free time in my diary – to think, reflect and hold up a mirror to how we are doing", explained Wayne. "Rearranging more than a full week forced me to look at how I set my routine".**



Why Should  
Anyone be Led  
by You?<sup>1</sup>

During a Time  
Like April  
2010?

- Notice your own reactions and state.
- If you had an infrared sensor, what would it detect in you?
- Keep in mind that high uncertainty can cause feelings of isolation, even if you are surrounded by people.
- Business as usual or something better? What are you aiming for as you recover from this unexpected situation?

1. A reference to the work of Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones on authentic leadership.