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“I learnt early on in my life never to have regrets, to face the future whatever it was going to be, to make tough decisions by getting on and doing it.”

The Problem: *The fear of fear itself*

It was the summer of 2006, the really hot one. As a major merger loomed between the company that I was running at the time – Redbus – and Telecity, one of our fiercest competitors, I knew that core members of my staff were getting increasingly nervous about who amongst them might be at risk of losing their jobs.

There was history between the two companies. Since the late 1990s they had been sworn enemies, battling to dominate the nascent market for data centre capacity. At times the fighting had been nothing less than cut-throat.

However, I had a vision that if Redbus and Telecity could only be brought together as one entity, the new company that emerged would be able to reshape the industry, by pulling in the same direction rather than expending energy locked in a

bloody battle. Competition between companies is healthy, but it can also be exhausting.

After two years trying to engineer the merger, and three or four failed attempts, I was finally at the point where, barring last-minute or unseen problems, the merger was on the verge of happening.

But my team was understandably worried. Each member knew that in most mergers there are going to be two people for each job and, out of necessity, one of those people will have to be let go. It was a time of tough decisions and there was nervousness about who would get fired. It was exacerbated by the fact that those who lost their job would do so to someone from the rival company they had been up against, some of them for their entire career.

I could sense, practically smell, the fear in my key management team. It was distracting them from the functions they had to carry on doing in the meantime. I needed them to confront and overcome that fear.

The Solution: *Swimming with sharks*

I wanted to create an experience that would help the team convert their fearfulness into *fearlessness*, something that would instil fear in them but then show them that their fear was unfounded.

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“We went off to swim with sharks. Face to face with an icon of danger. This would be confronting fear by being thrown in at the deep end.”

We had, as we still do, a regular management meeting away from the office. On this occasion I booked us into a hotel in Edinburgh: we held a business meeting, talked about the future, and the merger. We also visited a local whisky museum and, one afternoon, I took them out towards the Forth Bridge, where the minibus turned into the Deep Sea World car park.

Everyone was relaxed, if somewhat puzzled. The first inkling they had of what I had in mind was when each of them was asked for their wetsuit sizes. I wasn't letting them in on anything. With the suits on, we all had breathing apparatus training. Already there was apprehension in the ranks. Some had never put a wetsuit on before, most had never used an aqualung. For a first-timer, the sensation of wearing the suit and the apparatus felt claustrophobic and very uncomfortable.

Once the training session was complete, I finally broke the news of what was ahead. “Listen up,” I said, “you are all going to be swimming with sharks. Down on the seabed, inside a man-made aquarium, but with no cages, no Plexiglas protection. Upfront and personal.” That was when the fear kicked in. It was palpable.

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There were 13 of us on the outing. One of them had to be excused on medical grounds because he had a back problem. Fair enough. Four simply said they were too scared and were insistent they couldn't do it. I didn't try to railroad them, but left them to make up their own minds. While they thought about it, the others were being taken, two by two, into the water by the instructors. There was a five-minute swim down to the seabed, just long enough to get really frightened. Then you saw the sharks.

These were big beasts. Three-metre-long hammerheads and tiger sharks. When it was my turn the anticipation on the way down was definitely unpleasant but, once I was down there, I felt much better. It was extraordinary to be this close to the sharks. They swam right up to me, out of curiosity, but – well-fed by their handlers in advance – they were not looking for a little lunch. “Just don't put your hands out to touch them,” we had been advised. I hoped everyone would remember that because there was no insurance and I didn't want to lose anyone from the management team before I absolutely had to (and the danger was real – some years later there was an incident at the same centre when a staff diver was bitten by an angel shark).

As the groups of two went down, those left waiting their turn had an exquisitely painful time. They could watch each pair swimming down, then see them coming back out of the water – some absolutely buzzing with the wow factor, others just glad to be out of there, though still exhilarated. In the end everyone swam, bar one.

The Outcome: *Emerging from the challenge*

Once the shark dive was finished, we all went out to dinner. I asked everyone what they had felt when they realized what was in store. One guy said he had been excited, that it was something he had always wanted to do. Most of the others said they had felt a huge panic. Everyone admitted to having been terrified – regardless of the fact that the instructors diving with them had assured them it would be fine. Nothing the shark specialists said had alleviated a primeval fear.

And what about when they were on the seabed? That was still terrifying, they said, but nowhere near as terrifying as the anticipation and apprehension. As the seconds and then minutes ticked by and the sharks were only staring, not attacking, they had realized that what the instructors said was true. They started adjusting their expectations.

“And what did you feel when you came out?” I asked. “It was a life-changing experience.” “I was overcome. I dealt with something that I didn’t even know was an issue.”

The shark swimming experience became embedded as part of company folklore. At my wedding in 2012, more than five years later, I had four best men, three of whom were part of the team who had been on that swim. And all of them mentioned it in their speeches.

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That experience taught the whole team that it is easier to confront the reality than to dwell in apprehension.

The merger took place, and it was successful: the two main European rivals became the clear market leader, and subsequently had the critical mass to transform the data centre industry completely. Telecity turnover grew by over 350% in the following seven years.

My decision to go swimming with sharks was not macho posturing on my part, or just an excuse for a gimmicky awayday. Strangely, whenever I talk about the swim, people simply don't believe we did it. But it's true. I've got the photos to prove it. I talk about the sequence of dealing with initial, massive fear, moving to a phase of fear blended with excitement, and the life-changing exhilaration that follows. And, by reaching that final stage of exhilaration, you know that you can handle all the fear that went before. And they still insist, "No, you didn't do that . . ."

I didn't do this because I thought it would be a good story to tell. It had a genuine purpose, which led to a real impact on the people who took part, and was in turn an element of the ethos in the new company.

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If, by the way, you are not familiar with the data centre industry, here is a succinct explanation. A recent *New Statesman* focus

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on the industry put it this way: “A data centre is a building (or self-contained unit within a building) used to house computing equipment such as servers along with associated components such as telecommunications, network and storage systems.” Data centres handle vast quantities of digital data (and data has been described by McKinsey’s Dennis Layton as “the iron ore for a new industrial revolution”), and play a vital part in the way our digital world operates, like a brain at the very centre of the global digital network.

No fear?

There was a best-selling business book in the 1980s, written by the American businessman Harvey Mackay, called *Swim With The Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive: Outsell, Outmanage, Outmotivate and Outnegotiate Your Competition*. It was published in the era of Gordon Gekko, dog eat dog (or in Gekko-speak, “If you want a friend, get a dog”), ruthless, money-driven competitiveness. My swimming with sharks message is not about becoming a shark. Those days are over. It is about dealing with fear.

I believe that it is vital to learn how to remove the fear factor from business. That doesn’t mean denying that fear exists. I still experience many fears. But to progress, grow and build, you have to channel fear, and make that change from fearful to fearless. Let’s explore what that means in a business environment.

Address fear by accepting it as inevitable

Accept uncertainty as a fact of business life. If you are going to deliver more in business, you are going to have to head outside your comfort zone. Good business, successful business, demands the ability to encounter and confront tough business issues and decisions.

Hunkering down inside that comfort zone used to be the safe option – in the current climate, staying put and keeping your head down is no longer a guarantee of a natty gold watch on your retirement day. Nothing is guaranteed. Job security is an archaic concept. Progress involves poking your head above the parapet, taking a risk.

This is ever more important. We are living, working, succeeding or failing in a new environment, in which technology is changing at the fastest rate in history. We are living in an exponential world. There is no time for techno-fear: Carly Fiorina, the former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, has said, “The past 25 years have been the warm-up act. We are now entering the era in which technology will truly transform every aspect of business, government, education and society of life.” From the point of view of the IT sector, this is not only true but it will remain true for the foreseeable future.

The funny thing is, whoever is reading this book will have had x number of years’ experience behind them, where they worried and pondered many times about many things. Funnily enough they are still sitting here reading this book. So they have got

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through all of those things. It is almost like inviting someone to go back in their mind and think about when they were really worried about something, desperately worried, and yet here they are. The sun keeps on coming up and you somehow get through it. And that goes back to the sharks.

Maybe that was a particularly extreme excitement, but often in daily life it doesn't have to be that extreme. You are enjoying yourself; take the time to appreciate that you are enjoying yourself.

Be prepared to make bold career moves

There has been a fear factor in every job I have taken on, every career decision I have made. I have always gone in way beyond my own comfort zone.

At each stage, other people have confidently told me I had no chance of getting the job I was going for, or achieving the targets I set for myself and others. Impossible? No way. I constantly took on what looked like ridiculous challenges: moving across to run business in countries that were new to me and where I didn't even know the language. At the age of 21 I was appointed MD of a French tech company. I didn't speak French. But I knew I could learn it there. I arrived in Paris the weekend before starting the job, without an apartment. The prospect was daunting. The potential for being frozen with fear was high. I didn't know any better so I got on with it. Maybe I'm just bolshy by nature. But I prefer to think of it as being fearless.

Convert fear into a positive excitement about future possibilities

How can you pass on that sense of not being afraid of fear to colleagues? One of the most common examples I come across is with those who have specific targets to achieve. Let's say they need to achieve £1 million in sales and, at the moment, with the year end approaching all too fast, it looks like they will fall short by a quarter of a million. In most companies they will be feeling afraid, fearful of what that "failure" to achieve an agreed target might mean in terms of their career, job security, peer pressure.

I try to encourage them to step outside the fear, by telling them, "You are already a success for achieving 75%+ of your target. Now set yourself a higher target – get rid of your fear of not making that 100% because you don't need to be afraid. Go out there, and get me 105% – and by taking that ridiculously challenging opportunity and making it successful, when no one else could think you would do it, you will be a hero. Choose that outcome and then go back and find the building blocks you need to make it."

Appreciate the excitement of doing something that scares you

Rather than worrying about the prospect of leaving your comfort zone, remember the buzz that everyone on my team felt after swimming with the sharks. Embrace the fear and enjoy

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the feeling of conquering it. This is the art of converting distress into de-stress.

Many companies have experienced what has been called a “crucible moment,” a tough, scary phase when everything could have gone disastrously wrong, but which the team survived and from which they emerged stronger, tempered like steel. They have taken tangible lessons away from nerve-wracking experiences and turned them into working practices and protocols.

Always take the lesson from every situation

The follow-on from that attitude is calmly analyzing every business situation you find yourself in – the good, the bad and the downright ugly – and drawing a lesson that you can apply in the future even if the situation is, on the surface, completely different.

I take a healthily sceptical view of the statistics and percentages that research projects throw up – I read a report recently that suggested more people feared public speaking than death, which may or not be true: it depended how the question was framed. But in the research into fear, there is one figure that makes sense to me: 40% of us fear the future. In other words, we fear what has not happened, and may very well never happen; we fear what does not exist. Another 40% of us worry about things that have happened, our fear is rooted in the past, which has gone and which we cannot now affect. So 80%, probably more, of fear and worry is wasting effort,

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emotion and energy on what we cannot affect. It is far better to concentrate on those aspects of business and home life that we can alter.

A pattern emerges: by driving through the element of fear, by being prepared to go way beyond your comfort zone, by looking at things that most people would see as a risk as an opportunity, you can create the kind of luck that drives opportunity. Convert fear into a positive excitement about future possibilities.

In essence, do not fear what you do not know. Expect the uncertain to be full of fear but it is likely to be less than you expect. Enjoy it because it will be a learning experience.

“Nothing in life is to be feared, just understood.”

Marie Curie

Taking it back to basics

There was a point in my career where I was based in Denmark as part of ICL. I had been sent there to turn around ICL's main-frame service and repair company into an outsourcing managed services division. It was going well and, as a result, I was picked out to become part of what ICL called the Millennium Programme: this was in the late 1990s.

ICL had about 60,000 employees worldwide and they had chosen a group of 25 from their companies across the globe to

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be prepared and cultivated as potential Corporate Board members of the future. They had scoured the workforce, sourced us from different countries and different functions, and brought us all together.

The programme involved us spending a week or more every month on the programme for a whole year. It was a stunning idea: all these people with significant P&L and other responsibilities being taken out for a week every month of their very difficult challenges and put together in the group. Of course we all thought we were the golden boys and girls.

Then, what did they do? First, we were broken up into five teams of five. We had already completed a set of psychometric tests and multiple Q&As so they had already built a profile of us with a raft of characterizations. A psychologist joined each group. In my particular group, she proceeded to rip the heart out of everybody.

When it came to me she said, “So when you were about seven years old I suppose your mum and dad broke up, did they?” “Yes, but how did you know that?” “Well, you demonstrate clear traits of x, y, z. Not only that but I would imagine this was also part of your past.”

She was telling me more about myself than I could have even written down for them, by drawing my profile out of the analysis of my character.

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She ruined me in front of the other four in my group, and then did the same to everyone else. And when everyone was in tears, she said, “OK, guys, for each of you, the other four are going to tell you how you can improve yourself.” And we went round the table in turn.

One of the others was a sales director in a particular territory. All he wanted to do was run the local subsidiary, but his boss had been in place for time immemorial and showed no signs of moving. The advice we gave him, having heard his story, was “Leave, go and get a job with another company.” Within the context of the Millennium Programme, which was meant to find future leaders for ICL, this was very dangerous advice; but they were prepared to encourage it and, two months later, that colleague was gone. He got in touch and said, “Thanks guys. I took your advice, and I am now so happy.”

This was the point: the process broke us all down to a base level where everyone was nothing, and we could see that we had all experienced the same major issues and challenges, from childhood onwards. We had nothing to prove any more, we had gone beyond the fear of being broken down in front of our colleagues and, consequently, we became open to absorbing new ideas and fresh learning.

We were completely open to all inputs. From that point they started to build us up again.

There is a time to let go

In 2012, I was on honeymoon in South Africa. I took my wife, Shalina, up Table Mountain. What I had not told her was that, as an extra element, I had secretly arranged for a team of paragliders to meet us at the summit. She gamely agreed to paraglide with an instructor off the mountain.

As we prepared, Shalina was strapped into a harness; the instructor behind her was also strapped into a harness with the large paraglide. In front of her another member of the paraglide team was just down the incredibly steep slope.

I looked round to see Shalina holding on for dear life to the guy in front of her. At that point, the fear of jumping off Table Mountain had kicked in. She would not let go of the paraglide team member in front of her, absolutely would not let go, because she thought that he represented her security.

In reality, he was less secure than she was. She was higher up the slope, strapped to an instructor and supported by the giant wing. If a gust of wind had caught her, they would all be going down the mountain, only he would not have a sail. He was asking Shalina to let him go, because it was extremely dangerous. She was telling him she needed to hang on to something. Her mind, every instinct in her body, was not allowing her to think that holding onto him was even more dangerous for everyone concerned than just letting go. When she did steel

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herself to release her grip, she and her instructor soared high, spiraling out on an exhilarating ride.

Fear often creates hesitancy: most accidents on roundabouts are caused not by cars crashing into the side of each other but by people starting to pull out and then suddenly hesitating, so that the car behind shunts into the back of them. It is better to get onto the roundabout and, even if you are not sure which exit you need to take, going round a couple of times – being active, creating positive movement.

Either you do something about this issue that is causing you fear, even that smallest step, that first step of dealing with it; or, if there is nothing to do, then there's nothing to do, so why worry about it? It is going to happen. Normally you are afraid of things, of something specific, whereas worrying is almost like not knowing what you are afraid of, because it is a fear of what could happen but does not have to.

The song says "*Que sera sera, whatever will be will be,*" but it doesn't necessarily have to be as long as you take every step to mitigate it. Fast, flexible, fearless business thinking is the only way forward.

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The fearlessness factor #forgetstrategy

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Fear is not a “real” thing. It does not exist until we create it

The only place it can exist is in our thoughts about the future. We do not fear the past

Fear is a product of our imagination: it creates scenarios in our mind causing us to fear things that do not presently, and may never, exist

Danger is real, but fear is a choice

We are all telling ourselves a story. We can change the story so we can eliminate the fear

Once fear is eliminated, greatness can occur

“Don’t be afraid to take a big step if one is required. You cannot cross a chasm in two jumps.”

David Lloyd George

