

SECTION 56

TURNAROUNDS AND RECOVERIES

“God hurries and drives me. I am not master of myself;
I wish to be quiet, but am hurried into a midst of tumults.”
Martin Luther

“Mediocra is a non-Webster’s noun that describes the
results of democratic decision-making.”
Robert Lutz

Turnaround leaders are not legacy leaders per Dr. Mark Rutland. Turnaround leaders create unwanted change, move everyone’s cheese (sometimes they take it away), and prepare the organization for the legacy leaders.

Dr. Rutland was known for his work in saving Calvary Church in Orlando, Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida, and Oral Roberts University. In his fine book, *Relaunch*, he termed turnaround leaders as “gunslingers” who cleanup the town, run off the bad guys, close the saloons, then get on their horse and ride off. According to Dr. Rutland, a turnaround leader normally doesn’t have many friends and serves a lonely term of office. When he mounts his horse to ride away, there is relief. Often the workers claim to miss the spouse of the turnaround architect, but little is said regarding the leader who saved their jobs.

Organizations possess three kinds of new leaders. First is the “sustainment leader” who takes over a producing and successful organization. Next is the “recovery leader” who assumes the lead of an under-performing organization—one that needs to revisit its vision, mission and customers. “A turnaround leader” takes on an organization

that has completely lost its direction, is financially unsound, and is heading for bankruptcy without a dramatic makeover.

There is little to be said about the sustainment leader. However, a significant difference exists between the actions of a recovery leader and those of a turnaround leader, and they are worthy of much discussion.² Dr. Henry Cloud, in his fine book, *Necessary Endings*, writes that a turnaround leader strategically prunes the organization when the reality of failure is clear and present. I suggest that in a recovery, the leader *prunes* the workforce to better fit his intent and to establish a new direction. In a *turnaround*, the leader *purges* the workforce of the naysayers, half-steppers, stasis defenders, whiners, and other pathogens. The nature of the turnaround process makes the turnaround leader controversial to say the least.

Throughout this book, I have repeated how people resist change and that change creates an unhappy faction in the workforce. Even the best turnaround leaders dread the fallout from their decisions and know that for at least a while they will be viewed by others as the enemy. Robert Lutz refers to the *others* as “the dark forces that cling to the status quo.” He also reminds us that “dramatic change needs soak time” before it is accepted, but even then it may not be forgiven. To create the kind of change necessary to turn around an organization, the leader requires confidence, strong convictions, great energy, and a *damn the fallout* attitude.

I must say in the beginning that turnaround leaders are not necessarily better leaders than others. They are just better suited to lead dramatically failing organizations

² recovery: make a failing organization successful without changing its basic identity - save what is.
turnaround: remake a failing organization into a different organization - make something new.

– organizations that are already a train wreck or at least the collision is imminent.

Moreover, a turnaround leader will need a much deeper understanding of the operating environment of the failing organization so he knows where to take it.

Turnaround leadership is not for all leaders. Those who crave stasis, love, and affirmation, or dislike confrontation, are not the right choice to lead dramatically failing organizations that demand significant change in managers, key staff, strategy, and policies and processes. Nonetheless, I have known many successful leaders who may not have been the right choice for dramatic change but who excelled in their organization using a steady, grounded, and *seemingly* a more caring form of leadership. In those organizations, loyalty up and down the hierarchy was obvious, and forty to fifty hour weeks were the norm rather than the sixty to eighty hour weeks endured in a turnaround. So I cannot say that turnaround leadership is better leadership. But turnaround leadership is what is required in organizations that are failing and boneyard bound.

Those who take forlorn organizations and rescue them must be both visionary leaders, knowledgeable about the type and nature of the organization, and conceptual thinkers. As I wrote earlier, they must be able to see the end state and the path to get there. It did not take me long as a Marine officer to conclude that disorganized people were lousy tacticians. The ability to see the desired end-state and to conceptualize the path to that end state is part of the road to success in a turnaround. But I emphasize, it is only a part of the route.

In his excellent treatise on leadership as an emotional process in his book entitled, *A Failure of Nerve*, the late Edwin Friedman offered that the universal principle

of organizational success is the presence of *well-differentiated leader*. Friedman described this person as “someone who has clarity about his or her own goals, and therefore, “someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling about...someone who can separate while still remaining concerned, and therefore can maintain a modifying, non-anxious, and sometimes challenging presence...be able to take stands at the risk of displeasing.”

Friedman also explains the *ever-present* resistance to change that the leader experiences. He calls it sabotage and concludes that “it comes with the (leadership) territory and is characterized by cliques, backbiting, withdrawal, polarization, and subversion.” Turnaround leaders experience the above and more!

I suggest that the following are characteristics of successful turnaround leaders that are necessary in lieu of the prevailing tendency for reasonableness, patronizing, love, stasis, and consensus building.

Turnaround Leaders Create Turbulent Times

1. Change makers upset the status quo; they don't just move everyone's cheese. Sometimes, they take it away!
2. They create tension, conflict, and unhappy factions that can undermine the leader's intent and vision.
3. They function poorly within a democratic decision-making environment.
4. They are risk-takers who have a distain for risk-averse decision-making.
5. They are frequent users of the “No” response to batten down the big spenders.
6. They move mediocre, below average, and sometimes even *average* performers to the bench or early retirement.

7. They seek accountability and demand it from staff members.
8. Patience is not their strong suit.
9. They micromanage when losing confidence in a subordinate manager or staff member who is under-performing.
10. They can be irritable and seemingly insensitive leaders who analyze, decide, execute, move on, and never look back.
11. They possess strong convictions and execute in the face of opposition, recognize the consequences, and consider them acceptable.
12. They make pragmatic decisions that are necessary but unpopular and sometimes hurtful to employees *and* their spouses notwithstanding the positive results to the bottom line.
13. They absorb the criticism and shed the gossip and sarcasm.
14. They possess the willingness to face reality and create endings, e.g., programs, policies, and staff mediocrity.

These are characteristics of the turnaround leader. I could have added, often “characterized by self-doubt,” because turnaround leaders have feelings and the necessary decisions and endings create misgivings and doubts for the leader too. Turnaround leadership is not for the faint of heart or the bleeding heart (this is not meant to be a political statement). It is only for those who can function in tension and chaos and who do not need nor seek constant affirmation and friendships. They know that the success of the enterprise is more important than the leader’s popularity.

My first turnaround was in my first job – that of a high school baseball coach at Patrick Henry High School in Roanoke, Virginia. I assumed the position in the winter of

1966 after being a varsity football assistant coach in the fall. It was a program that was relatively new and had yet to experience success. Within two weeks of the start of the season, we were 0-4. But two losses were to the VA Tech freshmen and Staunton Military Academy, a post high school team. From there we went 10-6. But with a strong finish and a 10-10 overall record we won the Roanoke City-County Championship and the State Western District Championship (there were no state playoffs in those days). The next year we again won the City-County Championship, but we were runner-up in the District losing in the finals to a fine George Washington team of Danville, Virginia. That year I was selected as the first ever Roanoke City-County Baseball Coach of The Year.

In 1968, I resigned my position at Patrick Henry High School, drove to Richmond, Virginia and signed up for the U.S. Marine Corps Officer Candidate School (OCS). My intent was to join for four years, go to Viet Nam as an infantry platoon commander, and return to coaching. The four years in the Marine Corps turned into twenty-six years, and I soon learned that the Marine Corps was also coaching, but the stakes were higher.

My next turnaround was subsequent to completion of my training and commissioning as a Second Lieutenant. I took over command of 2d Platoon, Company I, 3d Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment in the Republic of South Viet Nam, replacing a second lieutenant who had been killed, one of about eighty casualties in a daylight ambush by the Q82d NAV Regiment. When I assumed command; the platoon was demoralized, without discipline, and led by an alcoholic platoon sergeant. Upon arrival, I was introduced to him by the company commander, just as the platoon was departing the company area to establish a platoon patrol base eight to ten kilometers from the

company command post. The aforementioned platoon sergeant, who was acting as platoon commander, had an alcohol issue that affected the moral and combat effectiveness of the platoon. Soon I would fire him, write him an adverse performance evaluation, and undo the bad habits, tactics, and procedures he had installed.

In 1980, I was an instructor at the Naval Amphibious School in Little Creek, Virginia when out of the blue I received a call from Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps to pack up; Mary and I were immediately moving to Camp Pendleton, California where I would assume command of 1st Air-Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (1st ANGLICO). The company-size command only had about 120 Marines and sailors, but it had a unique mission of calling for and adjusting Marine close air support and naval gunfire for allied and U.S. Army units, and members had to be parachute qualified.

When Mary and I arrived in California, I was not to spend time with the existing commander, who had just failed the Commanding General's Inspection, and was ostensibly being relieved of command. The Commanding General, Major General F.X. Quinn, told me the unit was not operationally nor administratively combat ready and would be re-inspected in six weeks.

This was going to be fun; the unit command post was located on the beach, giving us a great venue for physical training where we would soon run four to eight miles in boots and flak jackets in both packed and soft sand. These long runs were for endurance and not speed but built morale and esprit.

More importantly, I quickly learned that operations to the unit essentially meant parachute operations. Jumps were a source of macho braggadocio and extra pay, but tactically it was only a way to get where we could do our primary mission. It was about

how many jumps were in your logbook and could you land on or near the “T” (target on the ground). No one had any idea what was supposed to happen on the ground and once in the objective area.

The naval gunfire spotters didn't even know the “call for fire.” The aviators who served as tactical air officers were solid and knew how to call for and adjust close air support, but being pilots and bombardier/navigators by specialty, they did not know how to organize a field exercise. Other than flying and landing in hostile places in helicopters in Viet Nam, an adventure that I could do without, and receiving close air support in a few firefights, I had little experience working with Marine aviators. I preferred my place on the ground with the grunts. I trusted myself more than I trusted man-made equipment, especially helicopters. I well recalled the times in Viet Nam and later when there were moments of intense suspense sitting in the back of a CH-46 or CH-53 feeling helpless as the pilot negotiated obstacles or avoided enemy fire.

With an able staff, we were able to change the culture of the unit. We passed the follow-up Commanding General's Inspection and became operationally and administratively proficient while excelling in everything that was measureable to include simple things such as reenlistments and hometown news releases that brought recognition to the young Marines in their first enlistment. Parachute jumping was relegated to a supporting skill, not the driver of our training schedule.

I am an admirer of former Marine aviator Robert Lutz, the dauntless former president and vice chairman of Chrysler Corporation and recognized turnaround leader. Lutz is a self-described curmudgeon who, much like Dr. Rutland, has turned every organization he has touched from boneyard-bound to profitability. Lutz argues for

courage as the cornerstone of leadership and has little love for what he terms “nominal” or “positional” leaders. He describes them as “no risk” individuals lacking the fortitude to break the status quo and dodging accountability through compromise and shared decision-making (sounds a lot like public and private higher education). He coined the term mediocra, a non-Webster’s noun to describe the organization that functions on democratic decision-making.

Lutz also described the seemingly thoughtful, articulate, and popular left-brained commander or CEO as one who makes all feel secure and loved in the military and business in less turbulent times. But when all hell breaks out, the economy tanks, and other calamities strike the organization, it is the irascible, right-brained, stasis-breaking leader who has no fear of using the word “No” to button down the big spenders and moving the below average or mediocre performers to the bench, into retirement (early), or off the reservation.

My experience and observation of high-achieving organizations is that tension and conflict are the norm. Larry Bossidy, CEO of Allied Signal Corporation, takes it a step further by writing that, “Tension and conflict are necessary ingredients of successful organizations.” Thus, some gentle souls will chaff at the harmony-busting leader who creates change in people and procedures seeking to improve performance. It seems to me that perfect harmony is absent from high achieving organizations, and if it is present, it can be an indicator of averageness and the foxhole of the stasis lovers.

It must be in my DNA to want to be accountable and succeed or win at everything and that drive has not always led to popularity among some employees and peers. Some have rightfully accused me of micromanaging their departments or

divisions. I do have a tendency to micromanage areas wherein I have an intense interest or the subordinate leader is inexperienced, and I lack confidence in the direction or leadership of the department. In the latter case, it is only a matter of time before a change out occurs.

A significant part of leader maturation, particularly at the executive level, is the acquisition of the wisdom of knowing when to terminate a subordinate leader, doing it only after careful deliberation, hating the process, and managing the fallout. Executives should have a large front door and a small backdoor or in time the pushback will be extremely stressful. Leaders must do all ethically possible to find, hire, train, pay, and retain those who create revenue for the organization.

Subsequent to six months with the 2nd platoon and executing daily and nightly combat patrols and ambushes, I was called up to the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines S-3 Section (operations). It was standard procedure to bring the infantry lieutenants up to the staff due to the high casualty rate in the field and to exploit the operational knowledge they had gained. Although I hated leaving my platoon and knew I was well-suited for the bush, I was glad to go to the S-3, because it was the heartbeat of the battalion. The role of the S-3 officer or actual, as he was often referred to, was to plan and execute all battalion combat operations. As the new Assistant S-3 (S-3A), I was actually in charge of battalion operations whenever the S-3 was off resting with the battalion commander, or away from the command post (CP). The S-3 was a fine officer, and more importantly, he had the confidence of LtCol Thomas P. Ganey, the battalion commander. LtCol Ganey was hell on wheels and aggressively enforced all regulations. He would not hesitate to relieve a leader, if he perceived the leader was not insisting on

good order and discipline and operational excellence.

The S-3 was the only one able to *handle* LtCol Ganey, who seemed to shoot from the hip and create unnecessary havoc. If a commander was taking too many casualties and/or not getting sufficient kills, his days were numbered. The other senior officers in the battalion stood clear of the "old man" as he was called. I was S-3A for only three weeks when the 3d platoon commander of Company "I" was fired, never to be seen or heard of again. The S-3 officer thanked me for my time in the S-3 shop, but said the "old man" wanted me to go back to India Company and take over 3d platoon. Moreover, things were not well with the company and the company commander's job was in jeopardy. I was glad for the challenge the reassignment presented, and quickly realized that what was once a fine platoon under First Lieutenant Dave Miller was now a danger unto itself. The squad leaders were weak, and I don't even remember the platoon sergeant; he made no impression on me whatsoever. Although it was truly a turnaround command, I was unfamiliar with the term in those days. Nonetheless, I made the hard and seemingly unpopular decisions organizationally and tactically and within several weeks, I took pride in how the platoon had jelled. But in hindsight, they were Marines so why should I have expected anything less.

Soon I was hearing rumors that my previous command, 2d platoon had fallen on hard times. My successor had been fired and the platoon was being led by the platoon sergeant. Staff Sergeant Zenith Price was the 19th of 19 children from a West Virginia family. He was Benson-trained as he had been my platoon sergeant for five months before I left for the battalion staff. I had complete confidence in Price and was glad to hear that he was now the platoon commander even if it was only until a new lieutenant

arrived.

By now, I was approaching the end of my twelve-month tour in Viet Nam, when I am called to the battalion command post. There, I was told that the new battalion commander had fired the India Company Commander for outrageous misjudgment in the tactical employment of the company, and I was to immediately leave 3d platoon and assume command of the company. I was well-prepared for the new assignment. I knew the leadership of the 2d and 3d platoons and most of the battalion staff. I did not know the leadership in the first platoon.

The company was not as resistant to change as I expected, because the subordinate leaders had completely lost confidence in my predecessor. Soon after taking command, the company was moved to Hill 190, closer to DaNang as the pullout of U.S. forces had begun. Hill 190 was a defensive position with a mess hall and many equipment assets to protect. Our mobility and ability to plan and operate tactically was greatly diminished, and now I had the garrison-type problems associated with a static position and little ability to maneuver against the enemy.

Although our casualties went down significantly, so did our kills, and it was hard to see how we were winning our part of the war. Previously, we had been the point of the spear. We were twenty-five or so kilometers west of DaNang' and often operating independently defeating the enemy day by day with carefully planned patrols, ambushes, and helicopter-borne raids during hamlet/village cordon and search operations. Nonetheless, we adapted to the new mission, were again the respected Company "I" of the past.

In late May, 1969, I gave up command of Company "I" and the battalion

commander rewarded me with a week of Rest and Recuperation (R&R) in Sydney, Australia. In actuality, there was little R&R as all I did was drink too much beer, eat too much food, reminisce about Mary and our new daughter and fret about my troops still in Quang Nam Province.

Dr. Albert Mohler, Jr. is the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, one of the largest seminaries in the world. He is a noted author, sought-after speaker, and has made numerous appearances on national news networks. His work on Christian leadership is applicable to politics, business, education, and more.

In Section eight of Dr. Mohler's book, *The Conviction to Lead*, he explains that contemporary leaders often lack a clear conviction of where they are to take their organization. There seems to be a correlation here with Robert Lutz's nominal or positional leaders and Albert Mohler's leaders without conviction. Mohler's theme is that much of what passes today for leading is nothing more than management of people and material. According to Mohler, "Without convictions you might be able to manage, but you cannot really lead." I would add that to turn around a failing organization, it takes a leader with the force of will and personality to make the tough calls, handle this *blow back*, and persevere – one able to walk point in the defense of his convictions whether they be procedural or moral.

Subsequent to my experience in Viet Nam, I had an invigorating military career commanding organizations up to regimental size, with nearly 5,000 Marines and sailors. Generally, I followed competent commanders and department heads who passed on well-led units and departments that didn't require a turnaround approach, but simply had to adjust to my style of leadership and interest.

The one exception was after I joined the United States Southern Command in the Republic of Panama. As a Major having just graduated from the Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Virginia, I was assigned as an American embassy evacuation planner for the high threat embassies in Central and South America, primarily Nicaragua, Honduras, Panama, El Salvador, and Columbia. In Section 3, I wrote about my adventures of contingency/war planning in Nicaragua that far exceeded embassy evacuation planning. Upon promotion to Lieutenant Colonel and the arrival of Colonel John Spooone, USAF as the Director of the J-5 Directorate, Strategic Plans and Policy, I was named the Chief of Plans and Force Development for the theater of operations. At that time, the J-5 Directorate had never had a contingency plan approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS)! Notwithstanding that the process was cumbersome, was replete with compromise due to service rivalries, and required concurrence from all four Services and the JCS, it was unheard of for any Unified Command not to have approved plans for their theater contingencies.

There were two Nicaragua contingency plans that were considered top secret and a very high priority for completion. Others for Panama and other high threat countries had been in the works for years. The previous Director of J-5 was known as a master “word-smither” with little conceptual ability, so year after year the plans rarely got out of the headquarters to be considered for JCS approval and when they did, they were returned with numerous reasons for rejection. I don’t know if the plan failures were the demise of the previous Director or not, but the priority of plan completion changed dramatically with the arrival of Col Spooone as the Director of J-5.

Without going through the specifics of service parochialism – characterized by

gossip, jealousy, reluctant compromise, and even cooperation from the subordinate command planners – thanks to the audacity and force of will on the part of the new J-5 Director and General Jack Galvin, Commander-in-Chief of The Southern Command (CINCSOUTH), seven plans were approved by the JCS in approximately eighteen months. This was truly a turnaround for a department that heretofore had nothing to crow about other than exotic travel, cheap liquor, and exquisite cuisine in beautiful but dangerous Latin American countries. Admittedly, I was the author or editor of each of those plans and received two decorations (Medals) in that eighteen-month period as acknowledgement for my efforts.

In the early 1990s, while serving as the Chief of Staff and Assistant Division Commander for the 16,000 man 2nd Marine Division under the excellent leadership of Major General Butch Neal, the Division Staff Judge Advocate reported to the General, but he and his twelve or more lawyers essentially worked for me. The Staff Judge Advocate was a Colonel and a fine Marine, but his bevy of lawyers were mostly young captains and majors who, other than the uniform, might not be selected from a crowd as Marine officers. Their briefings to the General could leave me apoplectic. Notwithstanding my instruction and even demonstration of the modified position of attention, use of the pointer while briefing, and military briefing techniques, some would invariably brief with their arms and the pointer nervously flailing about, speak too fast using their hands as if they were attached to their mandible, interrupt the General in the middle of his questions, and display no concept of military bearing. Finally, I instructed the lawyers when they briefed the General to look at me (I sat on the right of the General), not him. They would know by my expression how they were doing. The

madder I got, the more nervous they became. Moreover, I had hand signals for them. With my hand to my face opposite the General, one finger up meant slowdown, two fingers up meant speed up, and three fingers up meant sit down. For reasons I don't recall, the Staff Judge Advocate was travelling frequently, and I spent a lot of time counseling and editing the work of his lawyers. Not only was I unimpressed with their military bearing, I was less impressed with their writing skills. As the Chief of Staff for the 400 man Division Staff, I was exacting and insufferable. I knew well that the efficiency of the staff was much more important than my popularity, and those lawyers surely had a distain for one Colonel Benson.

Upon departure from the great 2nd Marine Division, I joined the Navy's 2nd Fleet Staff on board the U.S.S. Mount Whitney. It was a boring and monotonous year as one of two Marines on the ship. I have a great respect for the U.S. Navy and previously experienced two wonderful years as the Commanding Officer of the Marine Detachment onboard the U.S.S. Oklahoma City, the flagship of the 7th Fleet. However, my year on the Mount Whitney was spent mostly at anchor off the coast of Haiti in humanitarian operations. Upon return to the U.S. in December of 1994, I was invited to return to Bridgewater College to help the new president find a head football coach. I was delighted to go and spend three days with Dr. Phillip C Stone, president, interviewing candidates and discussing his vision of change for the college.

Phil Stone had been a classmate at Bridgewater and had early on showed a propensity to lead. He was not an athlete himself but had an avid interest in athletics. We ran in different crowds – mine much more rowdy and non-observant of the College's strict behavioral rules. The one time we did get rowdy together, we ended up on

disciplinary probation for a semester.

During our three days together, we discovered that we had similar philosophies for leading and resurrecting a college that had been listing to the portside, with stalled enrollment growth, low student morale, and possessing a few departments with much to be modest about. I decided to retire from the Marine Corps and move to Bridgewater to be his Executive Assistant and Director of Planning.

Phil was a very successful lawyer before assuming the presidency of the college. At the time, I remember thinking that those lawyers in the 2nd Marine Division whom I had so abused were now laughing in their cups that that SOB Benson was now working for a lawyer.

When Phil took over at Bridgewater, it was not a basket case like some organizations I would encounter later. Thus, I would not classify it as a turnaround project requiring drastic change. However, it needed surgery and recovery time. The academic departments and maintenance departments were very good. The people in admissions and financial aid and athletics were good, but they were under-staffed, under-funded, and needed a new set of expectations. The fundraising arm was failing and a \$60M capital campaign was floundering. The student development department was overly provincial and too over-bearing for the society from which the student population emanated.

Phil Stone, bolstered by his experience as a Bridgewater board of trustee member, was armed with the information and leadership tools to right the ship. His upbeat, caring personality rallied the faculty and staff and elevated student morale that would soon cause a dramatic increase in student retention.

Changes in his expectations and replacement of some personnel in a historically unsuccessful athletic department soon led to a thirty-six game Old Dominion Athletic Conference football winning streak and a NCAA Division III heartbreaking loss for the National Championship in Salem, Virginia. Moreover, the college won the Old Dominion Athletic Conference Commissioner's Cup for overall athletic superiority. Meanwhile, over a period of six or so years, applications grew from approximately 950 to more than 2200. Not only was the \$60M capital campaign completed but another for \$5.5M campaign was completed in less than one year after its announcement and was used to build a beautiful new Wellness and Recreation Center.

Soon thereafter, the funds were raised to construct an \$8.2M apartment-style dormitory to house the rapidly expanding population. After three years as the Executive Assistant to the President and Director of Planning, I assumed the newly created position of Vice President of Administration wherein I was accountable for virtually all departments except the Business Office, Academic Affairs, and Development (fundraising).

Although I was anything but the spearhead behind the recovery at Bridgewater College, it was a powerful learning platform for what I was to face in 2004 when I assumed the presidency of Marion Military Institute (MMI) in Marion, Alabama.

MMI was a military two-year college and preparatory school that had been a school or college since 1842 and a military two-year college and preparatory school since 1887. Buildings dating back to 1864 were fragile and still in daily use. The preparatory high school, grades nine through twelve, co-existed with the college and some teachers/professors taught at both levels.

The Institute was plagued with a pending lawsuit by the alumni, who were not permitted by the Institute's president to come on campus as a group. This litigation had been ongoing for more than two years, with the anger and ill-feelings seriously affecting fundraising. Working with a new board chairman and a well-intentioned chairman of the alumni association, I wrote and negotiated an affiliation agreement that brought the alumni back on campus with two seats on the Board of Trustees. I traveled extensively winning the hearts and minds of the same alumni who had funded the lawsuit. Soon, fundraising increased dramatically and homecoming attendance grew exponentially.

When I arrived, the grass had grown over the curbs and well onto the sidewalks. A rain gutter was hanging down from the front of the Administration Building and was illustrative of what parents and prospective cadets would see when they visited the campus for the first time. I could find no evidence whatsoever that any building had been painted in the previous twenty years. Although the debt was less than \$3M, the endowment had been spent down to \$800K.

But worst of all, soon after I arrived, the college had completed the first phase of its Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) reaccreditation inspection that revealed twenty-two non-compliant areas. I had never heard of such a dismal performance. Having just endured a successful workup and completion of a reaccreditation at Bridgewater, I knew well what was ahead. We were allotted six weeks to correct the discrepancies before the SACS Team would arrive to see if these areas had been brought into compliance. I had little hope of repairing all of the non-compliant areas as some of the processes were to have been in place for one year! My only hope was to achieve probation, which would allow us a year to develop and implement the

procedures that were absent but required in order to protect our federal funding. After six incredible weeks of administration that included my firing of the previously selected Director of Reaccreditation, the visiting SACS team arrived for their three-day visit.

The reaccreditation team was led by a very professional two-year college president from Gainesville, Georgia, and after three days of detailed inspection and analysis, we escaped with a "Warning," which was better than "Probation" and gave us until the next summer to bring a few remaining processes into SACS compliance. Breathing a sigh of relief, the Board was elated, and the next summer the Institute received reaffirmation of accreditation.

The Institute's Board of Trustees had repeatedly failed to understand the importance of hiring an experienced businessman as president. Like so many other private, independent military schools, they had repeatedly hired superb, successful military leaders who had never had to make a payroll, create a profit margin, deal with the whims and needs of a faculty, co-exist with a Board of Trustees who are often Type-A individuals in their own right, or endured an arduous reaccreditation. Four presidents before me had departed under dire conditions.

Other challenges not initially observed were the remaining racially-polarized politics and poverty in the town of Marion and Perry County. The public schools were so depressing that few families with school-aged children would consider moving into the town. The lone private K-12 school wasn't much better. I was prepared to remove the staff and teachers who were less than effective, but replacing them was a continuous headache. The Academic Dean and Commandant were the first to go. I was able to hire a first rate Dean, but I suffered with a disloyal and incompetent Commandant for three

years before I was able to find and hire the right officer. I was very fortunate to find a superb Director of Development who helped me raise \$8M in five years and a Director of Admissions to fill the beds to capacity. With the increased revenue, we were able to upgrade the faculty, administration, and coaching staff and achieve what then Marine Colonel Hank Stackpole referred to as *balanced excellence*.

We doubled the size of the Board of Trustees and added a fifty-two-member Board of Visitors (often called advisors). The Alumni Association became energized and our fundraising and alumni affairs officers worked hard to overcome the bad blood that had resulted in the alumni lawsuit against the Board and Administration.

To deal with the decades of deferred maintenance, I travelled wherever alumni existed to include the capitol in Montgomery and wherever else we had a considerable number of influential alumni. In an attempt to energize the alumni and other donors, I shared my vision that Marion Military Institute would someday be The Citadel of the state of Alabama – after all, as the only military college in Alabama with 106 acres, twenty-five plus facilities and a district heritage, why not?

The serendipitous offshoot was that an alumnus who was a lobbyist in Montgomery explained my vision to Dr. Roy Johnson, the Chancellor of Post-Secondary Education and a former legislator with considerable influence in the state. Dr. Johnson responded that he would be interested in bringing MMI into the two-year college system and could bring considerable resources to the Institute. Dr. Johnson's influence was far greater than we envisioned, and subsequent to many meetings and lobbying all over the state, we had created the legislation (I wrote, Dr. Johnson edited, and the Board of Trustees approved). The bill achieved an overwhelming vote of approval in the Alabama

House and Senate and was signed into law by Governor Bob Riley nine months after the initial discussions.

This is a truly truncated version of the challenges faced that year, but the fact remains that MMI has a bright future. The quality of its Administration and faculty is evidenced by the eighty to ninety cadets who annually complete the MMI Service Academy Preparatory Program and are admitted to one of the nation's military academies – a number unmatched by any preparatory school or two-year college in America. Unfortunately, Dr. Johnson was prosecuted for nepotism related charges and more, shortly after the Institute became a state two-year college. I testified on his behalf before a federal grand jury to no avail as he pled guilty to lesser charges. Nonetheless, during my year working with him, I found Dr. Johnson to be an astute politician and a self-differentiated leader as described by Edwin Friedman, his book, *The Failure of Nerve*. Dr. Johnson followed through on every promise and always had the state and two-year college system's best interest in mind. He was a leader with vision, persuasion, inordinate drive, and persistence who got things done that no one else in the state hierarchy could have achieved.

The acquisition of MMI by the state of Alabama was a no-brainer. The state acquired a valuable, unique, and historical college wherein two of its daily-use buildings served as the Breckenridge Hospital during the Civil War. On the other side of the coin, the MMI Board and alumni ensured the longevity of a college that could have been in the boneyard with the next hurricane, tornado, or failed leader.

MMI became a state-owned institution in the summer of 2006. We spent millions over the next three years restoring the facilities while we dramatically increased

enrollment and fundraising. MMI was a legitimate turnaround that was accomplished with the leadership of a dedicated and generous Board of Trustees, a professional staff and faculty, caring alumni, and a wonderful community that genuinely cared about the survival and longevity of its MMI. My contribution was to recognize the problems, communicate my commitment, and execute the unpleasant aspects of necessary change. I rebuilt the staff, changed the standards and expectations, demanded excellence and accountability, and knew when it was time to turn over the reins to a new president with a new vision for a new era.

From the first meeting with the twenty-three other two-year college presidents, I felt the resentment of our presence in the system. Moreover, the new chancellor who replaced Dr. Johnson thought the legislation was a bad idea and publically said so in both the Montgomery and Birmingham newspapers. Of course, I publicly disagreed with him, and thus got myself at cross purposes with some members of the State Board of Education to whom the new Chancellor reported. Nonetheless, my Board (formerly Board of Trustees but now Board of Advisors) backed me completely, and "some bored with a pretty big auger," as Board Chairman Red Wilkins often said. During the three year period from 2006-2009, none of the three chancellors whom I reported to had the leadership, drive, and influence of Dr. Johnson!

Although relations with the other college presidents gradually improved, the fact remained that MMI was a military college and few understood its purpose and value to the Alabama two-year college system, and all felt the reductions in their budgets reflected the MMI funding spread-loaded among the other colleges. The frequent trips to Montgomery for Board of Education meetings that had little to do with MMI, the weak-

knee leadership from the Chancellor's office, and the friction remaining from the 2006 public debate with the Chancellor (who had since been terminated by the State Board of Education), caused me to question my future at MMI. I began to believe that there really is a shelf-life for turnaround presidents. With help from the Board of Trustees/Advisors, the alumni, and Dr. Johnson, the future of Marion Military Institute had been assured. With a robust enrollment, loyal and supportive alumni, and successful fundraising, MMI was not dependent on my presence—time to move on.

I was heading towards completion of my fifth year at the helm of MMI when I was approached about the presidency of Riverside Military Academy. At first, I had no interest, but after the third invitation I agreed to go to Gainesville, Georgia, to see this 102-year-old military college preparatory school that had undergone a \$95M renovation but was failing miserably and possibly headed for sale or bankruptcy.

I had great trepidation about even visiting this Academy because of the incredible support I had received from the MMI Board and its alumni. Moreover, the Board members had just written checks to seed "The James H. and Mary V. Benson Scholarship Fund," which was a significant honor, for which we were very grateful.

In December of 2008, I visited the Riverside campus, observed the disorder and absence of military discipline within the corps of cadets, and spoke with members of the executive staff (commandant/dean of students, academic dean, chief financial officer, director of marketing, director of development, admissions staff, and the deputy superintendent). It was clear that painful decisions would have to be made. During the interview process, I had some time with the departing superintendent (the Board had decided to change the position title to president) who was a good and decent man who

had an impressive military career but no preparation for the financial, enrollment, and fundraising challenges inherent in being the chief executive officer of a private academy. It appeared that the Academy was being managed and administered by the deputy superintendent who had never served in the military and was less qualified to administer the Academy than the superintendent himself. There was simply no operational area that I found redeeming. This would not be a recovery or repair; but a major turnaround involving a staff purge and more.

I accepted the offer of the Riverside presidency, and by the time I arrived in June, 2009, the astute Board of Trustees had terminated the deputy superintendent and the director of admissions. On Day 1, I terminated the ill-prepared academic dean, the commandant, and the director of development. Unlike Marion, Gainesville was a thriving city of 35,000, an hour from Atlanta. So there existed a robust pool of applicants to fill any vacancy made in the faculty or staff.

The board of trustees had been very transparent relative to the financial situation. I was aware that the Academy was losing \$3-5M each year due to over-spending and six consecutive years of decreasing enrollment. The Academy had completed a \$95M campus teardown and rebuild from 1997-2004 that was supposed to solve the enrollment problem, but the decline continued and the \$132M endowment had been depleted to \$83M. The debt incurred in the rebuild totaled more than \$83M, and the annual debt service was approximately \$5.1M, which was significant considering the revenue history of the Academy.

Two months before I was to assume the Riverside presidency, the Academy's endowment lost almost \$30M in the equity market, which put the *debt versus*

endowment ratio upside down to the tune of \$82M debt and \$53M endowment. In time the endowment would recover slightly but not significantly. The headwinds and minefields were daunting, but as I arrived on June 1, 2009, I was eager to take them on. I have always viewed every challenge in terms of an opportunity -- the passion to have the best team, the best military unit, the best college, or the best academy drives my daily life as I seek excellence across the spectrum of my interests and activities. I had complete confidence that through personal will, knowledge and experience, audacity, and my religious convictions I would be able to turn the organization. However, I also recognized that once the turnaround was accomplished, it might require someone else to sustain it as I would begin to look around for "the next hill to seize" as the chief financial officer at Bridgewater College stated when I departed there in 2004.

At Marion Military Institute and Riverside, the replacements I selected didn't always work out, and I sometimes had to eat crow and replace the replacements. If we are honest with ourselves, only 60-70 percent of our new hires turn out to be all we hoped they would be. Too often we compound the initial mistake by staying with a failed replacement too long. Permitting feelings to interfere with rational, common sense decisions suggests the absence of executive courage.

At the end of my sixth year at Riverside, we had filled 97 percent of the 540 beds, despite the recession and a tuition that exceeded \$30K per year. Our revenue increased from \$9.9M in 2009 to \$19.1M in 2015, an increase of 48 percent. Meanwhile our expenses increased from \$12.9M to \$15M an increase of 14 percent. We increased tuition 4 percent for five consecutive years, and faculty and staff pay increases totaled 12.5 percent for the period. For the period 2012 to 2015 operational revenues exceeded

expenses that included the \$5.1M in debt service. As far as we could tell, it was the first time the academy didn't have to reduce the endowment to balance the budget.

During my six years at Riverside, I fit Dr. Mark Rutland's description of the *lonely gunslinger* who has to run off the bad guys (in truth, many are good guys, just not the right fit for the organization at the time), make the unpopular decisions, change the foundational policies and procedures, cut the budgets, raise the standards, and hold the subordinate leaders accountable. The gunslinger or turnaround leader will manage multiple crises that often create ill-will, resentment, and much second guessing. Homeostasis will have been tossed out the door as he has created internal crises while managing the external crises. Turnarounds like Marion and Riverside take a toll on the leader, his family, his health, and at times his ego.

Whenever I have been frustrated, annoyed, and dissatisfied with my position and my boss, it has been when I worked for what Friedman called a *middler*. A middler is a risk-avoider, one who thrives on creating good feelings, and avoids conflict. He seeks to be a friend of everyone, a "good guy." He is everyone's pleaser and likes to talk tough about action but can't take any, because he must remove all the risk before acting. Unfortunately, this leader is often the brightest and most articulate individual in the room. In all likelihood, he will become the CEO or a Flag/General Officer. I get shudder when I think of some that I have worked for.

Robert Lutz, describes the dark forces in organizations that cling to the status quo as those who make the lives of the poets of change and progress miserable. In the face of these dark forces, the turnaround leader can be viewed as irascible, stubborn, hip-shooting but hopefully, convicted, and transparent. Transparency is important

because the change-maker must be understood, trusted, and respected, even if not welcome. The changes are going to create an unhappy faction, and the change-maker will eventually feel diminished and ride off into the sunset per Rutland. Hence, the savior of the organization will rarely stay long enough to enjoy the payoff of his work. I suspect that the nature of the turnaround leader is that he may be too restless and action-focused to enjoy routine, day to day, repetitive operations that should follow a successful turnaround.

The turnaround leader reminds me of the parable in Matthew 25:50 of the Holy Bible that describes the master who gave three servants five, two, and one talent, according to his ability, to maintain while he travelled. When he returned, he found the first two servants had doubled what they had been given, but the third, fearing he would lose the one talent he had been given, buried it. When the master returned, he dismissed the third servant. I believe this parable defines the Almighty's expectation of the leader when given the opportunity to save a floundering organization. Seeking to maintain the status quo without bold new initiatives, avoiding risk, and the absence of the courage and force of personality to make the hard and often painful decisions are recipes for dismissal and more – just like the third servant.

The turnaround leader, more than any of the others, must frequently walk point. He must stand alone out front, defy the odds against him, dismiss the gossip and criticism, and make decisions often with inadequate information; he simply can't bury the third talent.