

# CHAPTER 1

## An Eskimo on the Titanic

*The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic.*

—Peter Drucker

The *Titanic* was unsinkable. From the captain on the bridge to the humble sailor stoking the fires of the five boilers in the engine room, every crewmember knew that if he just did his job, the future was secure. Then the iceberg happened. On Sunday, April 14, 1912, at 11:45 p.m., the *Titanic* struck a jagged chunk of ice rising 50 to 100 feet above the water. The \$7.5 million ship (in 1912 dollars!) broke apart and sank in 2 hours and 40 minutes. No one was secure. Passengers and crew raced to lifeboats or leapt overboard.

When the tragedy struck, the skills and equipment onboard were hopelessly mismatched to the challenge at hand. The lifeboats, although exceeding current regulations (which were changed after the disaster), had only enough space for half the passengers and crew. In the chaos, many launched partly filled. The *Titanic*'s bountiful amenities—including electric elevators, a swimming pool, a squash court, a Turkish bath, and a gymnasium with a mechanical horse and mechanical camel—were useless in

addressing the real challenge that it now faced.<sup>1</sup> (Some might argue that a mechanical camel is pretty much useless no matter what the environment, but we digress.) When the *Titanic* broke apart, the skills valuable on the ocean liner proved of little value in this harshly demanding new environment. What counted were tenacity and skill in battling the elements. The optimism of the “unsinkable” Molly Brown in the face of death became a critical element for survival. (This optimism is vital in an organizational context as well, as we will consider later in the book.) The passengers of the *Titanic* included some of the richest and most prominent people of the age, but their money and power no longer had any meaning. Many counted themselves lucky if they could cling to flotsam in the icy waters. Some 1,500 people died, making it one of the worst maritime disasters in history.

Now, imagine that an Eskimo had been on board the *Titanic*.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps a Polar explorer had brought him to Europe and now planned to have him join a presentation in New York. The Eskimo would have felt ill at ease and sorely out of place in the *Titanic*'s elegant dining room. He would have much preferred seal steak in the familiar comfort of his own igloo to the fine china, chandeliers, and cigars. He lacked the skills to prosper on an ocean liner.

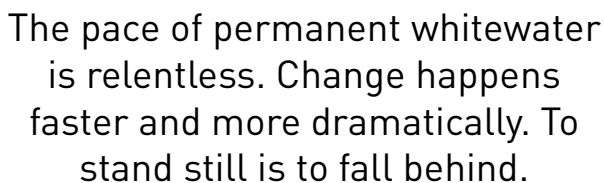
But when the ship hit the iceberg, he would have known just what to do. As the ship began to sink, he would have donned his animal skins and walked calmly to his kayak (he certainly wouldn't have taken to the open seas without it). He would have climbed in, fastened on his spray skirt, and launched into the rising waters. He could have paddled through the hallways of the ship, if necessary, out into the open sea. Or he could have “seal launched” off the end of the now-vertical deck of the ship. When waves hit his craft, he would brace and turn with his double-bladed paddle to meet them. If one happened to knock him over, he would have rolled back up.

The Eskimo would have easily made it through the several hours until rescuers came. He had often hunted for longer periods. Or perhaps, tired of the company of his so-called civilized companions, he might have just paddled off in search of land—or another iceberg on which to rest. Unlike the other passengers, he would have had the right tools, skills, and mindset for this environment. And that would have made all the difference.

The environment in which you live and work has changed. You might feel like a passenger on the *Titanic*, plunged into the cold water of a turbulent world. You may find yourself racing downstream on a whitewater river. Do you have your kayak ready?

## DANGEROUS WATERS

A talented executive from a major corporation once attended one of Greg's executive education programs. He was about 50, a bit disheveled and wearing a very nice suit, probably an Armani, that set him back at least \$2,500. Over the previous decade or so, the *Wall Street Journal* had chronicled his successes in leading high-profile deals.



The pace of permanent whitewater is relentless. Change happens faster and more dramatically. To stand still is to fall behind.

He kept ducking out of the classroom. At one of the breaks, he apologized for the interruptions, explaining that he faced a difficult decision about returning to work. Six months earlier, he had

awoken one morning and found that he just couldn't go to work. He literally couldn't even get himself out of bed. He just couldn't. It shocked him because he loved his work, but he arranged for a six-month sabbatical. He had never done anything like this. Now, at the end of the sabbatical, he had to decide whether to return to his job. He darted from the classroom to his cell phone to talk with senior members of his organization about his future plans.

He realized that he just couldn't go back to work. He didn't know what else to do, but he knew that he couldn't return. He wanted to get back into the river, but he couldn't. He had burned out; his insides had turned to ash. He had pounded through these frothing rapids for too long. He had toughed it out like a warrior, but he hadn't protected and paced himself. Now, he was tired and drenched to the skin, suffering from hypothermia. The steady passage of the river eventually wears down even rock.

The pace of permanent whitewater is relentless. Globalization has redrawn borders, shifted jobs, and created new competitors. Capital moves around the world at the click of a mouse. Technologies change overnight. Telephone companies compete with cable. A computer company, Apple, dominates the music business. Biotech, nanotech, and genomics all appear on the horizon ahead of torrents of change. E-mail, cell phones, and instant messages speed communication and increase the pace. Change happens faster and more dramatically. To stand still is to fall behind.

These forces have shaken up our organizations. Organizations rise and fall amidst ever-mounting competitive opportunities and threats. Mergers and acquisitions dismantle and reconfigure small and large enterprises. These tremors plunge employees into what is politely called downsizing, outsourcing, off-shoring, and right-sizing. Today, such organizational change is as certain as the rising and setting of the sun.

To keep doing the same thing in this environment of change is a recipe for ending up battered or burnt-out, like the executive in Greg's program. You can't brute force your way through permanent whitewater, anymore than you can survive the *Titanic* by being a strong swimmer. You need to recognize that the skills that worked in a more stable environment no longer work in a world of relentless turbulence. The job that you did on the ocean liner is not the job you need to do in permanent whitewater. Like the Eskimo on the *Titanic*, when the iceberg hits, you need to have your kayak ready so you can paddle away from the wreckage and maintain your balance in a sea of unpredictability and turbulence. When the world is turned on its head, you need to learn to think upside down (see sidebar "Thinking Upside Down").



### THINKING UPSIDE DOWN

In kayaking, to learn the Eskimo roll (a maneuver to bring the boat upright after it is flipped over), you have to first become comfortable hanging upside down in the boat, underwater. This violates every human instinct of survival for a creature used to a steady flow of air. Hanging with your head underwater, your first instinct is to get out of the boat and get to the surface as quickly as possible. Learn to suppress your impulse for panic. You need to develop new instincts to get comfortable being uncomfortable.

Wet? Get used to it. Cold? Put on the right gear. Oxygen deprived? Remember you will be better off hanging in for a little longer than taking a long, cold, possibly dangerous swim if you have to bail out of your boat. Everything about your above-the-water existence is reversed underwater. Up is down and down is up.

How do you make this shift? Practice, practice, practice. You first need to practice getting out of the boat, a wet exit. Simple enough, but reassuring to know that you can if you have to. Then you need to practice thinking upside down, and rolling up again. Once you have mastered this in the relative comfort of a swimming pool, you try it in moving water with turbulence all about you.

Then, you are prepared for real water. Here, you are upside down. You are pulled over rocks, pounding on your helmet. You are spun around. It is dark, cold, and wet, but you have trained yourself for this very moment. You can think upside down. You remain calm. You wait for the right moment, and roll up again into the sweet air.

In organizations, you need to change your mindset about what it means to succeed and how to succeed. To build a secure career, you need to take risks. To succeed, you may need to fail along the way. You need to grow comfortable with uncertainty and change. To keep your head above water, you sometimes need to think upside down.

## **SAILORS AND PADDLERS: YOUR REAL JOB IS CHANGE**

Are you prepared when the ship of commerce on which you've staked so much capsizes?<sup>3</sup> At this point, it doesn't matter what you were hired to do, you have one real job: change. How can you do this job well? Transitioning from being a sailor to a kayaker flips many assumptions and beliefs upside down. The attitudes, reflexes, mindsets, and skills are fundamentally different. You need a new mindset and a new set of skills, as we will discuss in the following chapters (summarized in Table 1.1). Instead of running flat out to the next stretch of relatively quiet water, you need to pace yourself. Instead of avoiding failure, you need to embrace failure and prepare to recover quickly. It is not relentless sacrifice, but

You live and work in a different world. You need new thinking and new skills to succeed. Are you a sailor or a paddler?

optimism and play that keep you afloat and turn bewildering turmoil into exciting adventure. Instead of following orders from the bridge, you need to set your own course—because no matter what the guide books say, you never paddle the same river twice; the flow, the bottom, or the obstacles have changed since the last trip. Instead of finding security in structure, concentrate on building maneuverability and networks to ensure your own “personal flotation.” In an environment filled with noise, actions speak louder than words. Instead of staking out a fixed position on the organizational chart, you need skills in designing and participating on ad hoc teams. And you need a certain kind of leadership, and followership, to succeed. You live and work in a different world. You need new thinking and new skills to succeed.

**TABLE 1.1 Sailor or Paddler?**

Sailor	Kayaker
<p><i>The world provides a sane pace...usually.</i></p> <p>The organization sets the pace, with sailors taking watches. The captain may call “all hands on deck” for limited emergencies, but there is time for recovery afterward. The organization buffers you from the turbulence of the world.</p>	<p><i>Pace yourself to preserve your sanity.</i></p> <p>The action does not stop, so you need to set your own pace to avoid burnout and exhaustion. You need to conserve resources in an uncontrollable, rapidly moving, and unpredictable environment. By controlling your pace, you can be in the turbulence but not of the turbulence.</p>

**TABLE 1.1 Sailor or Paddler? (continued)**

Sailor	Kayaker
<p><b><i>Avoid failure at all costs.</i></b> Failure is a disaster to be avoided. Capsizing ends the journey and leads to loss of command. Failure is not an option.</p>	<p><b><i>Prepare to fail gracefully and recover quickly.</i></b> Failure, or flipping the boat, is expected, so you need to accept failure and have the right skills and equipment to recover quickly. In fact, taking risks and occasionally failing prove crucial to success. Failure may be the only option.</p>
<p><b><i>Work is deadly serious.</i></b> Keep your nose to the grindstone, work hard, and you will rise up through the ranks. Reserve play for vacations and weekends. Uncertainty and turbulence are a source of danger and fear, to be avoided and controlled if at all possible.</p>	<p><b><i>Paddle hard, play hard.</i></b> You will work harder and have more fun in the process. Seek out the play spots. Optimism and resilience are crucial to recognizing the opportunities for fun and renewal. Uncertainty and turbulence provide adventure and play.</p>
<p><b><i>The ship provides security.</i></b> The ship is the source of security, so stay with the ship, no matter what storms and turbulence you meet. The ship will keep you secure as long as everyone does his or her part.</p>	<p><b><i>You are responsible for your own security.</i></b> In a turbulent environment, you are responsible for the skills and networks that build your own security. Others may help, but you need your own flotation and you need to know how to self-rescue.</p>
<p><b><i>Steady as she goes.</i></b> The captain and navigator in the map room set the course and the rest of the organization keeps the ship moving toward the coordinates from the top. You know your part and you play it. Stay the course.</p>	<p><b><i>Scout the river to set your own course.</i></b> You are responsible for understanding where you are on the river. You need to scout the river and to learn from others. Furthermore, when you hear the roar of the waterfalls—threats to your sanity or health—you need to know when to portage.</p>

**TABLE 1.1** Sailor or Paddler? (continued)

Sailor	Kayaker
<p><b><i>Communicate through the chain of command.</i></b></p> <p>The captain issues clear and direct orders that are relayed from the top down through an organization with a common culture, training, and language. Myths and stories often distract you from the job at hand.</p>	<p><b><i>Communicate through symbols, actions, and myths.</i></b></p> <p>In a noisy environment, words lose their meaning, so actions and symbols speak louder than words. Myths make sense of the turbulence and inspire paddlers to carry on.</p>
<p><b><i>Know your place and do your job.</i></b></p> <p>Every member has a specific and fairly fixed role. A clear hierarchy and chain of command ensures order. It's football—a stable configuration of preset scripts and plays.</p>	<p><b><i>Team for today's run.</i></b></p> <p>Paddlers form ad hoc teams for the day's run. They adjust as circumstances demand. The constant and shared job is change, so roles are reconfigured on-the-fly. It's pick-up baseball—with soccer on demand.</p>
<p><b><i>Lead through command and control.</i></b></p> <p>Leadership authority comes more from position, and every sailor knows his place. Not following orders constitutes insubordination.</p>	<p><b><i>Lead through trust and personal power.</i></b></p> <p>Leadership derives more from personal power, and roles can shift rapidly. Leaders need to take special care in building trust and selecting their teams. Followers play an active, powerful role and may have to step up to leadership.</p>

## THE LIMITS OF FLAT-WATER THINKING

Throughout this book, we use a metaphor of “permanent white-water.” This is more than a literary device. Metaphors play an important role in framing how you think about the world. The wrong metaphors can limit your opportunities and actions. For years, European mariners watched ships disappear over the horizon and concluded that the world was flat. They knew Euclidean

geometry. They could see the curved horizon. Intellectually, they had both the theory and the data at their disposal. They should have recognized the roundness of the world. It should have been self-evident. But the flat-world blinded them.

**“Flat water” thinking can blind you  
to the realities and possibilities  
of this environment.**

So can “flat-water” thinking in a world of permanent whitewater. You have probably received training, explicitly or implicitly, to think and act as a sailor on a stable sea. Just do your job. Move up the ladder. Build you pension. Follow the orders from the bridge, and you will have security. To do so is to think like a sailor on an ocean liner.

But if you have hit the iceberg or are already in whitewater, then you need to change the way you think about your work and your life. The equipment and strategies that you need to address change in permanent whitewater differ fundamentally from those needed on the open seas. In our companies and business schools, we have accumulated tremendous wisdom about how to run ocean liners and navigate through open water. These are important skills, but not the ones that will take you through whitewater. Whitewater requires new perspectives, new skills for success, and often survival.

Now, more than ever, your success or failure, your destiny, lies squarely in your own hands. This part of a permanent whitewater environment may most excite and, perhaps, most terrify. If you understand the dynamics of whitewater, how to read and run the river, you can become more comfortable with change and can

better pace yourself for not just survival but for thriving in the midst of change. On the following pages, we'll explore the distinctive skills, equipment, and mindset you'll need to succeed. Take a firm grip on your paddle and remember: Your success depends heavily on you and your individual skills—skills not only in the job you were hired to do but in your real job—which is change.



### THE TAKEOUT

If you are in permanent whitewater, you need to stop playing the part of a sailor and start thinking and acting like a kayaker. Your job is not your role or your title. Your real job is change.

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