

# Calm Under Fire

*Andy Stumpf, ex Navy Seal Officer and trainer speaking to fire fighters about leadership in dangerous situations.*

“The reason I chose ‘Calm Under Fire’ is that it's the most infectious leadership quality that I've ever seen in a combat environment. I don't know if you guys have ever been around when a leader is losing their mind and seeing the impact that it has on every other person around them. It just spins it up and it spins up and you start coming off the rails. Conversely, on the other side of that, I've seen guys, you know... (e.g. ‘Black Hawk Down’ is a good movie where people can watch. There's this dude walking along, getting shot at. I actually had a chance to meet that guy. I'm like, “Dude, what was going through your mind.” He's like, “I thought is just gonna die, so I'm gonna take my time.” Okay, I guess. That works, but the effect on his men was huge.)

So, how do you do that though. How do you become calm under fire? I'm going to end it up I just given you guys three points that I hope resonates. All the other stuff I gave you is just layering some context and so hopefully this resonates a little bit more.

(1) So the first point is, you have to recognize that you're a leader. This is a tough one for guys, especially when they're new. This is something we hammer into the Seal community from day one. In the absence of leadership you have to step up and make a call. You know, rank is a great thing. It provides structure to the military, structure to the fire service. But what do you do with the guy who's the most senior isn't in the moment and has the most up-to-date information to make the right call. You can't just rely on rank for that. We do this to guys all the time on our training. We'll be in the middle of a contact drill, which is where they're shooting and manoeuvring and we'll just come and we'll pull the senior ranking guy out and we'll watch what happens. Okay? Everybody is a leader. You have to recognize that.

(2) For calm under fire you have to constantly and consistently be self-aware. The reason I brought up the show story is because that particular house run, I sat down and I thought about that a lot. I still think about it because I remember the feelings that I had leading up to it. They became trigger points for me later on. I did 12 years as an enlisted guy and then five years as an officer. In the last tour that I did I was overall responsible for 18 guys in Afghanistan and it was super, super stressful. I thought back to that day over and over and over again. As a leader, I laid out triggers for myself. One for you guys that I would highly recommend is: recognizing any type of emotional reaction. If you're getting frustrated you need to take a step back. If you're upset you have to take a step back. If you don't do that, the ‘straws’<sup>1</sup> are starting to come in. I have never seen a combat situation or high-risk situation improved by an emotional reaction or an emotional attachment. Not a single time have I seen it, because it has no bearing on outcome. Doesn't matter how fired up you are, it's not going to change the outcome. I have seen the converse of that or the inverse, where the emotional reaction just takes the train off of the track and the next thing you know your ‘augering in’<sup>2</sup>.

Set the triggers for yourself. Recognize the trigger and then take a step back. So, for myself, my last tour duty, the rules I set for myself were, I was never going to yell. (1) I have a radio. So why do I need to yell? And, (2) When I start yelling other people start yelling. The other one was to the best of my ability I wasn't going to run. Unless my life was completely in danger, I was going to walk. I'm not going to walk slow, necessarily, but I was going to walk with a purpose. Because that allows you as a leader to approach a situation where your boys are working and you get the 30,000' view because there six inches in front of their face. Right?

So recognize you're a leader, set the alerts for yourself so you can maintain composure and then the last thing is – since I think we can all agree that everybody at some point in time is going to be a leader, you have to take responsibility for how you train your men – situational awareness. I've only met one or two

1 – Unknown jargon term from Seals

2 – Unknown jargon term from Seals

guys who are complete naturals. They just get thrown into a situation and they can deal with it. I've 'lost the bubble'<sup>3</sup>. I've lost the bubble overseas and had to take a step back. The only way you get good at doing it, is if you train to the standard that you expect your guys to perform at. So, how do you do that. You've got to train hard. Your training needs to be, I want to use the word "punishing", but not punishing towards your guys. It needs to just be extremely difficult. That falls on the leader, which is everybody in this room. If you don't do that, how can you expect your guys to maintain their situational awareness? If you don't push yourself to that threshold of where you're just getting ready to lose control, then you back it off a little bit, just getting ready to lose control then you back it off a little bit in a training environment. If you think you're gonna flourish in a high-risk environment, you're in for an incredible surprise.

People crumble under stress and pressure. So again, the single most impactful quality of the leader I've ever seen is their ability to maintain calm under fire. It's infectious. It'll infect your guys. Right? So be a leader, recognize the alerts in yourself and then train your guys as hard as you possibly can"<sup>4</sup>

Laurence

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(Readers will need to look up for themselves any scriptures alluded to in this document)

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3 – Unknown jargon term from Seals

4 – Andy Stumpf (May 2016) “SEAL Leadership and the Fire Service | FIRExTalk SoCal '16” [10:36-15:51]  
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