

Future Lessons From Past Leaders—What do Queen Elizabeth I, Thomas Jefferson, W.E. B. Du Bois, Boris Yeltsin and Dwight Eisenhower have in common...Audacity

By Rhea Blanken, Results Technology, Bethesda MD

In Alan Axelrod's book, *Profiles in Audacity, Great Decisions and How They Were Made*, he addresses how world leaders and regular individuals decide, act and even become key players in worldwide and cultural events. Could association boards and staff learn anything from the men and women profiled in this book? We all could.

Crossing the Rubicon

Axelrod refers to the *Rubicon Factor* in his explanation of audacity. He says it is the leadership quality that enables an individual to define circumstances and then make decisions, knowing what the high stakes are and acting on the decision once made.

It is having the courage to act and fear failure simultaneously. To the audacious leader, a reasonable decision is not necessarily a safe one. Even reasonable can involve great risks. Thus, it is "knowing" the "reasonableness of risk" and acting in accordance with it.

Caesar lived the *Rubicon Factor*. He demonstrated the two characteristics of great decision-making: needing to make a choice between or among high-stakes alternatives AND knowing a decision must be made and cannot be avoided. Audacity is confronting risk and taking it on. It is seeing the downside clearly for what it is; facing a decision with risks and dangers known; then taking action recognizing the worst and still being fully engaged. Yet it is only after the results are in that we fully realize the audaciousness of what happened.

Most of us will never have to face moments that effect world events but we do face ones that change our personal and professional lives. We are in positions of great influence to foster social change by altering organizational models, educating and enact standards and ethics. When we have to stand for our commitments and principles in the face of conflict, it seems risky and uncomfortable. Except, those profiled in Axelrod's book prove time and again that comfort is not a criteria when making important decisions.

In *Profiles in Audacity*, five distinct types of audacious decision-making are analyzed: crisis, venture, conscious, risk everything, and hope. Which type of decision are you facing? What decisions will you make? What actions will you and your organization take?

The Decision in Crisis

Queen Elizabeth I wanted to be with her troops preparing to meet the Spanish Armada invasion. Her advisers strongly warned against it. They feared Catholic sympathizers attempting to assassinate her. Nevertheless, she went to her troops in full battle dress, standing with the lowliest foot soldier, declaring to them she shared their fate. She told her troops they were masters of the resistance not its victim. Win or lose, they would create the future together. They won.

The Decision to Venture

Thomas Jefferson was unwavering in his commitment to explore west of the Mississippi. Even before becoming President, he commissioned a French botanist to make the trek. The expedition failed. Once inaugurated, his dreams and desires for exploration engaged again. Was it his wish to know what existed in that vast unknown territory; a lust for expanding America's commerce and



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land holdings; or scientific curiosity? It does not matter. What matters is he committed to having the expedition happen and Lewis and Clark succeeded.

The Decision of Conscience

When W.E. B. Du Bois decided not to follow Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" as it addressed race relations and instead formed the NAACP—that was risky. While both Washington and Du Bois supported ideas of black capitalism, their position on social equality were different. For Du Bois, offering an alternative future was more than a parting of ways with the current model. It was a rejection of the past, a refusal to continue what had been. He believed America could do better. His audacity changed the nation.

The Decision to Risk Everything

As President, Boris Yeltsin wanted more autonomy for the Soviet republics and deeper embracing of the free-market economy evident in the US and Europe. He wanted it for his country now not later. This was not welcome news to the old guard of the Communist Party. They didn't like the elimination of their "sacred cows" so a coup was launched. While Gorbachev was "held" under house arrest, Yeltsin disregarded the attempt. He defied the tanks, openly embraced a new world order, and remained in communication with the world through the coup all via cell phones and computers. He risked the fear of failing and won economic freedom for his country.

The Decision to Hope

Before Dwight Eisenhower give the order for the D-Day Invasion, much planning and calculating had been done. The combined needs and goals of the land, sea, and air forces had to be considered. The landing terrain, weather, unpredictable nature of the English Channel, tide conditions and German land-mines all had to be accounted for. In the end, it was "practically unpredictable" to have all the right conditions available at the same time. Eisenhower knew the plan was fraught with disaster. He even wrote a note accepting full responsibility if the invasion failed. It did not fail.

How will your organization embrace its next uncomfortable decision—take risks and be in action in the face of possible failure? Where will life next demand you be an audacious leader—standing for hope, risking everything, being of conscious, venturing into the unknown, and meeting the crisis head-on? Remember, audacious action is not the result of courage or bravery. It is the result of assessing the risks, determining the options, devising a plan and taking action.

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