What Surviving a Rocket Explosion Taught This Veteran Entrepreneur About Never Giving Up



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Let’s be real for a moment. We are all being hit hard right now. Millions of people have been infected around the globe, hundreds of thousands have died. Many businesses that have been built with sweat and tears over decades are now left for ruin.

My business, Redline Steel, has been forced to pivot massively in order to survive the unexpected storm. But we’ve been through challenging times before. Crisis, trials and setbacks

have been unwanted friends of mine for as long as I can remember.

Here's the thing: I truly believe that not only can a crisis define you – it can remake you.

On May 3rd, 2012, I was serving my third, military tour in Afghanistan and working out in a gym when a 107-mm rocket exploded about three and a half feet from me. I barely remember the ensuing gunfire and the rescue, but I survived. Shrapnel went all the way through my leg, which led me to six months of physical therapy just so I could walk and move normally again. I had nerve damage in my back and required lumbar block fusion surgery.

Less than 18 months after my injury in Afghanistan, I landed my first magazine cover on *Ironman Australia*. The gym almost killed me, but it also saved my life. A lot of people would have fear re-entering something that almost ended their life, but I was able to turn that negative experience into a positive career change for me.

I want my failures, trials and painful moments of life to fuel me – *not* beat me.

Pain will not win

The rocket explosion is a part of my life, but it's something I don't dwell on it. I focus on what's ahead. I couldn't work out exactly like I used to, but I found workarounds. I had to change my workouts, but I didn't let that stop me. Instead, I let it fuel my motivation.

We cannot allow the world to tell us what we can and can't do. We have to decide this for ourselves.

That is central to overcoming nearly any obstacle, thus, it's been a core belief of mine for a long time.

Redline started in a very similar way; with a setup disguised as a setback. I had a partnership that fell apart on the day we were supposed to sign. I had already invested thousands of dollars in attorney fees for the deal. But I pressed on anyway.

In the military, we call it “Charlie Mike.” We continue on the mission, and no matter what obstacle is thrown in my way, I find a way to work around it. I’ve found that no matter what, if there’s a will, there is a way.

In other words, I had to develop a will of steel.

Focusing your energy

When things are out of your control, stay focused on what you can do, not on what you can’t do.

So what do you do when you have zero control? Because it’s true — sometimes events take place beyond our control, just like what’s happening right now on a global scale. No one expected that we would go into quarantine, that the economy would plummet or that we would rapidly descend into a recession.

But, again, this was nothing new for me. I’d already experienced something similar just 18 months beforehand.

In November 2018, at the peak of buying season when retailers like mine make or break their year, I had a $70,000 piece of machinery that’s central to my entire production line completely break down.

It was under warranty, but I didn’t have a backup, and the parts had to be imported, which was going to take more than a month. We ordered another one and frantically worked on solutions, but the orders began to backlog.

Breaking promises hurts the most

We had promised thousands of customers that we would get their orders out by Christmas. And although we did everything humanly possible, we couldn't meet the timeline for everyone. Customer complaints started to pile up as rapidly as my orders. I was called a fraud and other horrible names I'd never been called, all while we were doing everything humanely possible to solve the issue.

I was forced to cut off any new sales because we couldn't fulfill the thousands of orders we already had in a timely manner. This caused a massive budget crunch as the cash flow stopped. Fortunately, I had saved more than three months of operating expenses, but even with that, we were on the brink of bankruptcy. We were very, very close, and I had to pull every dollar I had out of savings to pay payroll and expenses just so we could stay open. I had to sell generators and plasma tables and whatever I could for $500, $1,000 and $2,000 at a time just to make ends meet.

Blood is not always family, and family is not always blood

I've learned that the true definition of family is when you'll do anything for anyone when it's the least convenient for you.

Two weeks before Christmas, 60 percent of my staff left. This left me crippled. Not only did I not have my main machine working, I lost most of my workforce.

There were nights when I was driving home late and thought, "If an 18-wheeler comes over into my lane, I don't know if I'll move."

One thing's certain: I'd rather go through another rocket explosion than endure the six months of hell that crisis

brought me.

But all was not lost. My remaining team showed me who I could really count on. They became my heroes. I learned to put my trust in the team that remained and to show up for them. I discovered who was really there for me when I needed them the most. The people who stayed believed in me; they believed in us. They encouraged me, continually reminding me that we'd get through this.

My team is my greatest asset

Keeping the core team I kept and losing the other 60 percent ended up becoming one of my greatest gifts. It showed me who has my back and gave me space to improve the rest of my team.

So fast-forward to the COVID-19 crisis hitting. While I didn't have to make staff cuts, I knew most of my team was on two-income households, so I decided to offer to cover all my staff's house payments for the month of April. That wasn't easy for me because we're not a venture-backed company sitting on loads of cash. But these people had been there for me, and I wanted to do what I could to be there for them.

Additionally, as a student of consumer behavior, I realized that Redline had to shift its entire marketing strategy. We don't sell critical-need products, so we needed to shift very fast and come up with a new strategy. Recently, some of the entrepreneurs I coach have been pivoting their marketing strategy to find the opportunity to great results so I know it's not just me getting lucky. The opportunity is still there, it's just moved.

We created a Give Back collection of 17 different products, where we offer a free gift to medical workers and other critical frontline responders who are bravely serving. In about a month, we've given over $2 million in product away

thanks to this strategy and acquired hundreds of thousands of new customers at an incredibly affordable customer acquisition rate.

Today, I have a stronger staff and leadership than ever before. We are protected by five layers of redundancy so if a machine like that ever breaks down again, we are covered. Plus, we were poised to grow faster and better than ever before. That wouldn't have happened without the crisis of November 2018.

With everything America is facing now, business owners need to get comfortable with the uncomfortable and start thinking outside the box. What was working for you before may not work for you now.

No one wants a crisis thrust upon them, but the benefit of a crisis is that you will find new limits. When I look at some of the most seasoned entrepreneurs, I see that they've stepped outside their comfort zones so often and gone through so much in the past that they can bet on themselves to know that they'll make it through whatever they're facing.

Some lasting lessons

1. Get comfortable with the uncomfortable. When the market shifts, pivot rapidly.

2. Never forget — whatever challenge you're facing can remake you better than ever.

A quote I love by General Douglas MacArthur is "Americans never quit." I think that's as true and relevant for today as it was for any other point in history. It isn't the season to quit. It's the season to remake ourselves.

So keep going, my friend. I promise you can get through this.

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