

# Don't be thrown by a Man Overboard!

By Alex Alley and Paula Reid

Alex Alley and Paula Reid were core crew on the Global Challenge round-the-world yacht race and own Velocity Made Good – a leadership and performance development business. They recently published their second book: **The 7 Racing Rules**. In this article we look at Rule #3: Practise your MOB (Man Overboard).

Preparation for a round-the-world yacht race is obviously different from preparing for a business, but if you look beyond the specialist technical planning there are many similarities, and one that stands out is preparation for crises.

Training for the Global Challenge race had to be incredibly thorough; for one reason the team consisted of people with vastly different skill levels and experience – much like a company. On an ocean racing yacht there are countless things that can go wrong when out at sea – hence the phrase, 'worse things happen at sea!' Some will be more common than others and their effect on the crew and their ability to continue/survive will vary.

For example, the boat could hit an object and sink. Hitting something is surprisingly common but it is highly unlikely that a modern boat will sink (and only then, certainly not quickly). However, having a crew member fall overboard is quite likely and if the MOB is not recovered quickly and efficiently, the consequences could be dire.

It was for this reason that much of our pre-race training was spent practising our Man Overboard (MOB) drill so that if/when it did happen, we all knew exactly what to do, almost without thinking. The added benefit of this training was the discipline it produced; thanks to the repeated practising, we all knew how to act in a crisis, not just a MOB situation.

In our MOB training it was important to swap the roles around so that everybody knew and understood ALL the roles and their implications. The reason for this is quite obvious – you never know who is going to go overboard! If we each had our own specialist roles for the crisis, and one person went missing, then their role wouldn't be fulfilled.

Buddying up colleagues at work or in crisis planning can improve:

- Teamwork
- Communication
- Co-operation between teams
- Mutual respect
- Understanding of each other's roles

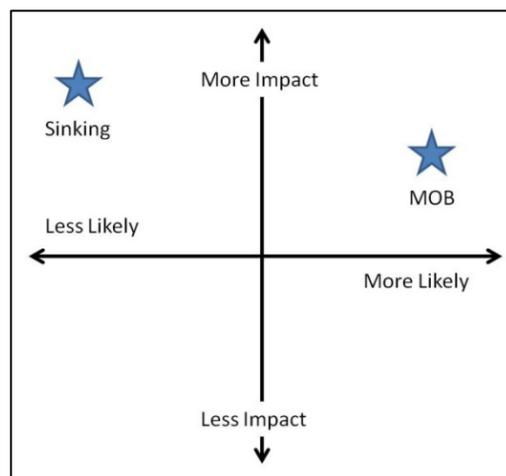
The same applies in business. It is no good giving each person a specific 'crisis management' role, because you never know what the crisis will be and who will be around to manage it. So it is important that everyone understands what needs to be done, even if that means giving each person a secondary role or a role buddy. This has the added benefit of

improving teamwork, communication and cooperation between teams and employees as they understand and appreciate each other's roles - acting like a job share or job shadowing.

## Risk analysis

You can plot the likelihood of something happening against its impact, as shown in the basic risk analysis diagram below.

In this example, the boat sinking obviously has a huge impact but is very unlikely. MOB is much more likely and has high impact so should be expected and therefore planned for and practised.



The top right segment of the grid covers what should be expected and practised most. No matter what industry you are in, or whatever you do in life, it is useful to know what to expect and what to do when things go wrong.

If you draw up your own grid and fill it with events that may happen in business, then you will have a clearer picture of what to expect and be able to prepare for it. You can score each event /10 for impact and risk to provide some basic metrics.

## No Surprises

Anticipation is the ultimate power; being able to predict and solve problems before they happen; predicting patterns, predicting what's around the corner and being prepared. 'Forecasting' the likely weather ahead. Then, by being more in control and more proactive, teams can set themselves up to win. They are less likely to lose someone overboard (a key staff member or client) and less likely to hit an obstacle.

It is naïve to be caught out by 'surprise' or choose to have a blind spot to a potential future failure when predictions, patterns, insights and trends can be sought, evaluated and proactively tackled head on.

Imagine playing a video game or racing simulator that you have never played before. You are likely to underperform on your first go. But when you have played it once, or a few times, you know what to expect and can play it better. If you practise and know what's about to happen, then you are more mentally ready and physically skilled to handle it.

## Most Likely Case Scenario

Most organisations ask what the 'best case' or 'worst case' scenario could be. The question you really need to be asking is what 'the most likely case' scenario could be? What is your organisation's equivalent of a MOB – a high likelihood, high impact negative situation?

Something that either threatens the operation, reputation or safety of your organisation or would knock you off the top spot.

It is also important to see things as they are – not necessarily better or worse. Crisis preparation requires intelligent thinking and an honest approach, which in turn requires clarity and courage.

Two questions you need to ask:

1. What is your equivalent of a MOB?
2. What will you do if/when it happens?

Some examples of business MOB's might be:

- Loss of key customer
- Competitor bringing out a cheaper or better product
- The arrival of a new competitor – more flexible and innovative
- A disruptive innovation reducing the need for your product
- Financial cutbacks
- Star employee leaving / talent drain / loss of leader (your specific equivalent of a MOB)
- Empty pipeline, product doesn't get licensed or blockbuster comes off patent

At least pro-actively recognise and tackle crisis scenarios or 'what if' events that populate the top, right-hand box of the grid – the ones which are most likely to happen and which will cause the most damage. Acknowledge them openly and give them some airtime – don't ignore the elephant in the room – get them out and talk about them. Once they are openly acknowledged, they become tangible and... tackle-able!

Then you are able to discuss honestly and proactively solutions, communications, best practices, processes and strategies for dealing with them, or ideally prevent them from happening in the first place.

## Building Institutional Toughness

The whole organisation can be involved in crisis scenario planning – whereby individuals and teams develop resilience and leaders demonstrate strength, courage and integrity.

Ask employees or teams for equivalents of a MOB and solutions and plans to resolve them. Create opportunities for people to detect and analyse potential future failures. ('Monitor-Evaluators'<sup>1</sup> or 'black-hatters'<sup>2</sup> would be particularly useful to invite to these exercises.) Those involved will gain a maturity – a mental toughness or resilience – through discussing and disaster planning for tough situations.

Then practise realistic scenarios. One practice is not enough and the more realistic the scenario, the more developmental it will be, producing the steadfast mental toughness when it really matters.

If the organisational equivalent of a MOB is discussed, planned and practised thoroughly, then when a crisis does happen (whatever it is),

<sup>1</sup> From Belbin's team roles. Monitor-Evaluators are great for dispassionately evaluating options and critiquing.

<sup>2</sup> From Edward de Bono's 'Six Thinking Hats'

people will have the muscle memory, mental agility and situational awareness to be able to deal with it and, importantly, move on and learn from it. The more practice, the more discipline and resilience, and the more people will be able to cope with the crisis – any crisis – when it comes.

### Benefits of Practising MOBs

Crisis planning and practice also cultivate transferrable skills. The behaviours, skills and attitudes developed in our MOB drills, for instance, transferred easily to other similar critical situations – such as an accident on deck. Crew remained calm because they weren't thrown by the unexpected, everyone knew their roles, leadership was clear and decisive, communications were fit for purpose and teamwork was efficient and controlled.

If an organisation develops crises plans, behaviours and attitudes for its most likely/impactful crises, the plans are likely to be generally effective for other eventualities. Communications planning, role allocation, emergency procedures, continuity plans and post-crises mop-up activities are applicable across a broad spectrum of 'what if' scenarios and thus contribute to general institutional toughness, a more highly developed and mature workforce and a risk-management reputation.

### AAR (After Action Reviews)

Another method of mitigating risk and preparing for future eventualities – such as a MOB – is to review frequently past performance to ensure continual improvement and protection from future failure. On our boat *Team Stelmar*, we reviewed and debriefed every manoeuvre with the whole on-watch team and transferred new learning or tips to the other watch at the next watch change. We would review the whole procedure, including successes and failures, striving for peak performance through continuous learning and development. We were honest and open to self-assessment, never assuming, ignoring or diminishing the need for improvement or change.

This served as a proactive and preventative exercise. Proactively we sought continuous or disruptive innovations to improve performance, and preventatively we sought ways to protect ourselves against a potential future failure.

*One near miss could be the next MOB.*

Luck may play a part in preventing one crisis but it obviously cannot be relied upon. This is where reviews are important, even when they don't seem necessary, as some successes may be due to a specific chain of events, external factors or luck.

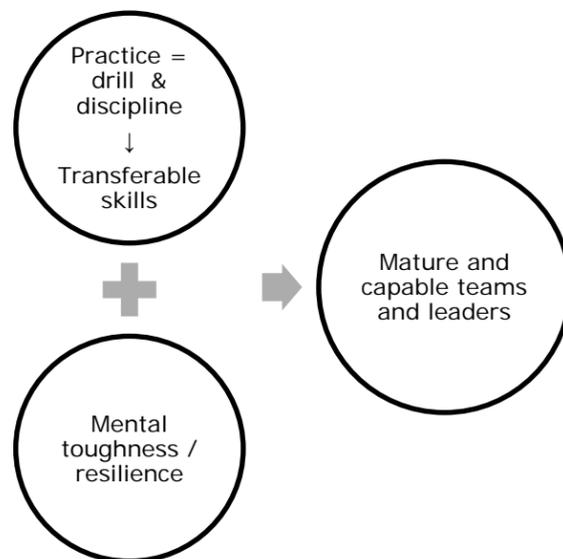
After Action Reviews (AARs) take place following an event or activity to discuss four key questions:

- What did we set out to do?
- What actually happened?
- Why did it happen?
- What are we going to do next time?

Lessons learnt can apply as equally to day-to-day business as to potential future MOBs.

Crisis planning sharpens the sword, enabling higher performance as well as crisis prevention and management.

It's tough staying at the top, and practising your MOB does not allow for stagnation or complacency. It does, however, bring about innovation, efficiency, resilience, teamwork, new skills, confidence and, of course, crises mitigation.



### In summary

#### Rule #3 - Practise your MOB

**Crises are not predictable but they should be expected and therefore planned for. Make crisis management planning part of your business planning. Have crisis focus groups working out the enhanced disciplines required in emergencies. Rehearse scenarios with various teams using different crises. Be prepared. Don't forget there are major benefits to doing this.**



*Alex Alley and Paula Reid are Directors of Velocity Made Good, a leadership and performance development company based in London.*

[www.velocitymadegood.co.uk](http://www.velocitymadegood.co.uk)