

## The joy of overcoming challenges:

lessons from walking on broken glass

Mel Starkweather

*A leadership conference promised to challenge us—and they delivered. Mid-way through our day, the program leaders pulled out a large, rolling suitcase and moved it to center stage. As they emptied it out, my jaw dropped; my heart quickened. I met the equally stunned gaze of my colleague. The program leaders rolled out a long mat filled with broken glass.*

**Really? Broken glass? “Hard pass,” I thought.**

The day had begun with easier challenges like breaking boards, but this was next level. It seemed impossible until our leaders took us through the process of **how to succeed** in this task. As they broke down the process, my “hard pass” turned to curiosity, to an itching desire to give it a try.

I’m not one to back down from a challenge, but this was unlike anything I’d ever done before. I was intimidated and I had no reference for how to succeed.

The program leaders showed us how to safely navigate through the glass and managed our resistance:

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**We feel empowered when the inconceivable becomes possible.**

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**1<sup>st</sup> Asses** – How did we feel about the proposed challenge and why?

**2<sup>nd</sup> Coach** – They described what we needed to think about to do this safely and successfully, and repeated it as necessary.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Prepare** – Did we understand their directions? Did we want more information or assurance?



The author walking on broken glass.

A thoughtful participant played Annie Lennox’s “Walking on broken glass” to add to the ambience. We went from hesitant to lining up.

There is enormous joy in discovering a process that leads to success. We feel empowered when the inconceivable becomes possible.

**From there, we went on to break arrows with our necks.** Picture this: the arrow tip is pointed at your throat, while the nocking point is pressed against a board. (The board we broke, to be exact.) Then you walk forward.

This was arguably the most challenging task. The arrow fully engaged the fight, flight or freeze response. When something feels existential, it’s a game changer. A cut on my foot would be an inconvenience, but an arrow in my neck?

The leaders explained that no one had ever been hurt by this exercise, but my brain struggled with that as I felt the arrow press into my neck. With the coach chanting “Commit!” next to me, I pushed forward and shattered the arrow.

We finished the night with a fire walk. After the previous tasks, this was remarkably easy.

During this day of challenges, I thought about my team – and any team for that matter. **We ask ourselves and our staff to make the improbable happen every day.** We ask them to fix problems that don’t have easy solutions. When novel difficulties pop up, we count on our teams to create novel solutions. We ask our teams to take on risks that might seem existential – like going through organizational change.

When we ask our teams to shift their operations, KPIs or identities within an organization, they can feel some of those same fight, flight, freeze feelings as I did with the arrow. **From their perspective, are we asking our staff to break an arrow with their necks?**

Are we doing our jobs as leader-coaches, ensuring that they feel comfortable enough to commit to the change? Are we making sure that the challenge feels safe and structured enough that our teams can move ahead with confidence?

The program leaders **never once said, “This is easy. You’ll figure it out,”** or “You’re responsible to walk through this pile of glass by the end of the day.” They made sure we had the skills and felt comfortable with the process. No one was forced to do anything, but everyone wanted to take on the challenges.

All organizations need to change at some point. It’s only fair if we as leaders first do the following:

1. **Make sure that the team understands the process they will go through.**
2. **Ensure they understand why this is necessary and their roles in the change.**
3. **Equip the team with resources and people to turn to if they need help.**
4. **Ensure they have the time, given other deliverables.**
5. **Check in with them frequently to see how it’s going and what they need.**
6. **Remind them of what they have achieved in the past that prepares them for this.**

We are all capable of making the improbable possible. Sometimes we need coaches to remind us that we will be safe when we commit. We often need to be reminded of our past successes before starting challenges.

**Cirrus Change Readiness** was designed to help leaders and their teams lean in to challenging projects with their platform of tools, education and feedback evaluations. Cirrus helps leaders assess, coach and prepare so their teams can conquer challenges. Go to [Cirruschange.com](http://Cirruschange.com) to get started.

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