




Keynote Speech

Thank you for that introduction and good evening ladies and gentlemen.

My story takes us back to just before Christmas 2005. It was around this time that I found out some things about myself that I wished I'd learnt far earlier.

Up until that the time before Christmas of 2005 just about every work day was a good day in the office. Many of them were great days in the office.

I was living and working as a fishing master off the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. Life and work were idyllic.

Crystal clear open oceans, fresh seafood. Minimal routines – just the day following the night, and repeat. Friends, family and fishermen – all over the globe. Almost every port in the Southern Hemisphere had a friend for me to connect with, or not. Such was my life. Such was my office.

In November of that year, I was looking for another opportunity and was asked by a businessman acquaintance to deliver a motor yacht from Hong Kong to Sydney. I knew the job was on the horizon because we had talked about it earlier in the year, but it was put on hold. Now it was urgent. The boat had to be in Sydney by Christmas. The money on offer was just what I needed at that time of my life, at any time of my life, and so I accepted.

This type of job was my fish and chips. I had been in command of all types of small craft since 1981. I had battled monster seas off Tasmania's west and south coasts and had survived the eyes of two category five cyclones in the South Pacific. I had fished and delivered vessels around the entire coastline of Australia and sailed countless thousands of nautical miles chasing and long lining tuna. My adventures covered the Great Southern Ocean, the north and

south Indian Oceans, the South Atlantic Ocean, the south and western Pacific Oceans, the Tasman Sea, the Solomon Sea, the Coral Sea and the Andaman Sea. I was in no doubt of my abilities and I thought I had seen and survived anything the ocean could throw at me. I was experienced, expert and excited.

A short 24 hours after I had accepted the job, I was on a plane to Hong Kong to prepare myself and the boat for the trip to Sydney. I had taken with me an experienced, toughened seaman – S**** – to help with the preparation and sailing of the boat. S**** was no ‘yachty’. He was a hardened seaman that I could rely on.

We arrived in Hong Kong and set about preparing the boat for the trip. Our budget was generous and even though the boat had been in dock for some months, it was a straightforward job getting everything in order. There was a lot to do, but it was just a matter of doing them. Supplies, repairs, documentation, instrument and mechanical tests all done. Tick, tick, tick.

During this preparation period S**** and I worked hard during the day but in the evening enjoyed much of what Hong Kong had on offer. Floating sampan restaurants and beautiful fresh food and company.

Being the charismatic sort of guys that S**** and I were, it was inevitable that our socializing led to the development of a close liaison with a couple of other visitors to Hong Kong. It even got to the point that when we had to leave Hong Kong on our journey, we were quite sad about leaving our new relationships behind.

But we had a job to do.

My new friend gave me a piece of paper with her address and number in Manilla, and I was determined to look her up once I got this job done. I was determined to pick up where we had left off. Things were starting to blossom.

Once everything was in order and ready, S**** and I headed off on the first leg of the journey - a simple leg. We really needed to get underway because there

was an impending typhoon and we wanted to make sure that we outran it before it hit. No risk really.

But we didn't get very far. Some major mechanical problems kicked in less than 24 hours out. This boat hadn't really had a decent open sea run for some time and so some part of the engine seized up as soon as we opened the throttle. We were quite disabled, and I had to make the disappointing decision to return to Hong Kong. I thought, ah well, at least we can get back to where we left off with the socializing, but on the other hand getting home before Christmas was going to be touch and go after this false start. Those were the only thoughts that were occupying my mind on the start of the return to Hong Kong base.

Early on during the return sail, I was off watch and lying in my bunk below. I must admit I was dreaming of a cozy meal of steamed shrimp dumplings at my new favourite floating restaurant with my new favourite companion when I felt the boat give out a sudden stagger and splutter.

Ah – that wasn't right. I became instantly alert, alarmed and up. A wave of adrenaline flowed through my body. I threw on my jeans and woolen jumper and dashed to the bridge. I met S**** halfway, he said,

“We got problems skip. I'm going to the engine room.”

“Ok,” I said, “I'll check the bridge.”

The bridge was a blinking dashboard of alarms and red flashing lights. No sooner than taking all this in I heard S**** rushing up from the engine room.

“I'm going for the life raft Skip.”

I ran to the engine room to see for myself and was greeted with a scene from The Titanic.

Water gushing in like a torrent. I went for the emergency pump valve, but it was too late - she was going down. The water chased me up the stairs to the

bridge. I grabbed the long-range radio. I had it preset to the international distress frequency. Grabbing the mike, I spoke the words no seaman wants to utter.

“Mayday-Mayday-Mayday.”

No response. I did hear the telltale mike clicks over the static that told me maybe somebody had heard my call and was trying to respond. But I had no time to repeat, let alone give our location.

The bow was already out of the water pointing skywards. She was going down fast. I staggered down the sloping deck, I filled a bag with everything I could find and met S**** at the stern. He was frantically pulling the line that activates the cylinder to inflate the life raft.

After a few agonizing seconds, the life raft exploded into shape, we piled everything we had gathered into the raft and I said to S****:

“You first”.

Then I clambered aboard and dropped into the ocean. We both peered out from under the canopy just in time to see the boat slide under the sea.

The time between me sitting up in my bunk bed and now sitting in the life raft was about 60 seconds. A minute.

Life as we knew it had been suddenly and brutally stripped from us, the battle for survival was beginning and with the night approaching, we had no idea of the horror, fear, pain, desolation, and despair we were going to face in the coming excruciating days.

I checked off the items in my mind that I had placed in the bag: 15 litres of bottled water, two litres of bottled orange juice, one litre of long life milk, four 350 ml cans of lemonade, one 500 gram block of cheese, one 500 gram tin of salted peanuts, three apples, two 250 gram packs of glucose sweets, one 250

gram block of milk chocolate, one VHF hand held radio, one packet of new flares which contained three rockets, two red hand held and one orange smoke canister.

At least we were all good for a few days. Just need to ride out the storm and then hope the flares and smoke canister attract attention from passing ships who will surely be on the lookout for us.

S**** and I set to organize the contents of our new home and mentally prepare for a tough day or two in the open ocean. But the next brutal event occurred. The roar of an approaching wet avalanche gave us a split-second warning, and then a massive wave slammed into us immediately capsizing the raft and tipping us into frigid turbulent water. As I spun in the turmoil desperately holding my breath, I thought:

“So, this is how it ends, the fate of many seamen.”

The roar subsided. My training told me that there would be an air pocket inside the upturned raft. I struggled upwards, and my head emerged into beautiful air. S**** was already there, and he said to me:

“Are you OK little buddy?”

“Yea I’m Ok.”

We weren’t to know, but this short two-handed dialogue was about to repeat itself every few hours over the coming days. We were shocked, fearful and in wide-eyed terror every time it happened. It was raw.

From our training we also knew how to right the raft by duck diving under it and flipping it back up. We finally mastered this after a few attempts. S**** and I clambered back inside, then it hit us – with the capsizing of the raft we had lost all of our precious supplies - rations, water, flares, radio, torches pumps, repair kits, supplies, everything - all gone.

Even the handwritten address from my new Hong Kong friend had gone. She'll never know what happened to me.

We were just left with two sponges, a single paddle, a length of rope and the rescue ring. To make matters worse, one of the two buoyancy chambers of the raft was irreparably destroyed. Essentially, we were left with half a raft and two sponges. We were dumbfounded in shock, drenched to the bone and already freezing cold.

I said to S****,

“We are in big trouble now mate, big trouble.”

We were suddenly having a very very bad day at the office.

All the time spent in Hong Kong planning for this trip didn't mean anything in our newfound situation. We would never have planned to be floating along in a wild ocean of waves and weather.

I suppose this sudden change in circumstance is not too dissimilar to what many of you recently experienced in your work. None of you would have planned to be locked down during the recent pandemic. You probably experienced back then what S**** and I were experiencing right at this point – despair and anxiety.

We needed to act to survive. No time for strategy meetings, gathering requirements, designing a solution, testing it, preparing reports and documentation, and then explaining to everyone what the adjustment is going to look like. We needed to act now. I've seen organisations do the same throughout 2020. Respond and act immediately. It's been amazing how well companies have adapted to change so quickly. It does make you wonder if the usual organizational change management cycle is all that necessary.

Did anyone go through the extended change cycle when the pandemic hit? Probably not. Yet, I feel that the outcomes would have been pretty much the

same. It's incredible that when our backs are to the wall, the basics kick in and we come up with goods. I've seen some amazing tacking and jibing by organisations during the pandemic to make sure they survive and thrive. Structures were adjusted, tasks were redirected, all hands-on deck, everyone pitching in, jobs changed – it all happened quickly. And those didn't adjust with speed, often floundered.

I suppose how the workers felt about the change would have been the same, similar to any organizational change. There would have been unhappiness, uncertainty, fear, hard-to-let-go, inadequacy, blaming.

S**** and I were feeling all of these right now. Big time!

But we had to quickly adjust, refocus, rethink, push through, get it out there.

And we weren't to know how long this was going to go on for.

Each day was worse than the last as hunger, thirst and horrific conditions started gripping our bodies.

I remember the survival lecturer at the Australian Maritime University always started the course by stating that on average the human body can live for seven days without food but only three days without water.

Three days! No way was I going to die in three days. I just would not contemplate this. I couldn't.

I can just imagine one of those fast motion overhead camera shots recording our deterioration over the time we were tossed about on the ocean. It would be obvious that we were getting smaller and smaller each day. Our bodies were withering, our resources were disappearing, our clothes were disintegrating. We would end up a tiny insignificant spec on the horizon never to be seen again.

What gave me immense strength was the love I held for my beautiful children

Sophie and Daniel, I just could not imagine that I would never see them again and they would spend the rest of their lives in sadness never knowing what happened to their Dad.

Being cast into this almost hopeless situation brings into sharp contrast the essentials of life. It provides you with perspective. It brings into focus what is super-important in your life. Your fundamentals become crystal clear.

If you are having a bad day at the office and roadblocks are frustrating you, I can only suggest you remove yourself from the scene and get some perspective. From way above, everything looks small, except the things that are truly important. The important things are magnified. When everything is stripped back to the essentials then you will see the real purpose of living, and I can assure you that it has nothing to do with whatever you are experiencing at the office or in your work.

So, the most important thing in my life was there in front of my mind's eye and it motivated me to keep going and survive.

When I was bailing out the water with my tiny sponge, I mentally chanted a rhythmic mantra of:

“Sophie and Daniel, Sophie and Daniel, Sophie and Daniel.”

The regular raft capsizing-and-righting routine went on for days and the bailing out of the water became part of that routine. At some stage of the raft flipping yet again, I realized I had lost my sponge. It had vanished. S**** halved what he had left of his sponge so that we could continue our bailing out of the raft.

We were down to our basics. Our basics became even more basic as the sponges deteriorated almost to the size of a postage stamp. My mantra become longer and longer as the water bailing exercise became a full-time job.

S**** and I were clearly declining in health, stamina and mental strength. We were being teased by intermittent rain clouds providing half mouthfuls of rain

water caught by the canvas cover of the life raft dribbling down to our parched lips. We were also teased by distant ships steaming past us on the horizon. Why on earth did we think we could catch the attention of freight ships passing by some 20 or so kilometres away with their engines thumping away and everyone on board working away at their day job inside the ship. Our shouting and waving wasted our energy.

We were also tempted to abandon life raft and try to latch on to one of those massive oil rigs that stand like monsters on another planet as we floated past them – but that would have been disastrous.

Our 2-3 day nightmare turned into a traumatic experience of 10 days and 10 nights. We floated on and on, and in and out of being alive.

On day ten, I was not feeling so good, just on the edge of consciousness, my mind was tormented in hell. There was not much left of me, only skin and bones. I had become that spec on the horizon. My skin was covered with ulcers and sores. I idly tore away part of my rotting jeans exposing my lower leg. The sight that greeted me was devastating. My skin had worn away and my shin bone was clearly visible. To make matters worse was the sight of angry red and black tendrils running around my leg - and the smell. I knew straight away - gangrene. I cried silently in my mind in total despair.

S**** looked over and grimaced,

“Doesn’t look good little buddy”.

I was certainly getting littler and littler.

We lapsed into silence, I knew I could not fight this assault on my body, as much as I did not want to die, I knew that the situation was dire. A little while later I heard S**** mutter something.

“What did you say mate” I asked.

He said, "I'm going to pray to God."

So, this is what it has come to – I did the same.

I did not ask to be saved but only to be forgiven for all the bad things I had done in my life. I told him everything. There was no point lying to God.

I went through my whole life revisiting each event, each incident, seeking forgiveness.

When I finally finished cleansing my soul, two miracles occurred. The first was immediate. I went from indescribable hell on earth to being at peace. When I slipped into sleep there were no more nightmares. I was surrounded by family and friends.

I could see the light was shining for me.

Up until then, the nighttime was the worst time. Every one of the ten nights were long and nightmarish. Instead of saying 'Good night' to each other, S**** and I would repeat together,

"I hate the night."

But now, I was at peace.

And then the second miracle happened on the next day. On the eleventh day we slammed into a tiny island 24 kilometers off the coast of Vietnam. No matter how fatigued we were, no matter how sub-human we felt, no matter how close to end of life we were, the joy of hitting some solid earth was a far greater feeling. Both of us willed this to happen. For me this has been the most confusing part of my survival – was it luck? Coincidence? Divine intervention? Of course, nobody can answer this question. But I was so thankful.

The only thing I do know is that after asking to be forgiven I was not afraid of death and was at peace. Saying sorry is a powerful tool. I had a lot to say sorry

for – some small, some big, but all were wrongs where I didn't really go out of my way to make other people feel good. In fact, I'm pretty sure I made them feel bad. Mainly because of my self-centered selfishness.

I'm sure that we all have a file full of wrong actions that we know could have been done in a better way.

I'm sure in all your individual lives you would have a similar collection of wrongs that could do with an apology. Let's be realistic, not all of our actions contribute to a 100% red carpet treatment of others. We need to be skilled at apologizing. Saying sorry.

In my spiritual moment of seeking forgiveness, I completely bared my soul. There was no pretense, no sense of excuse, no spin.

Some people own up to an error or agree that their actions were wrong, but never say the words, 'I'm sorry.' The words need to be said.

Some people admit that the action was wrong but try to give it a reason. This is an excuse. Excuses deflect. We need to take responsibility for our actions and acknowledge that wrong was done, without trying to provide some contributing reasons. Use the words, 'I am accountable.'

And an apology needs to display empathy. Best to clearly show that you know how the error has affected the person. None of this 'sorry to anyone who I may have offended.' I know that in my stranded situation I couldn't directly speak to those who I wronged, but it came from the heart to whatever God I was speaking to. In my hallucinated mind I was telling those that I wronged that I was sorry, that I was responsible, and I know it had a terrible impact on them at the time.

You must all think I've been a terrible person. I don't think I have been. I've taken risks, I've pushed through, I've followed my own selfish dreams. It is inevitable that these sorts of behaviors contributed to some wrongs.

But whatever wrongs I had done, I was certainly paying for them now.

Back to the part in the story about hitting land. On Day 11.

We actually hit an outlying coral reef about a kilometre offshore, which made for yet another painful challenge in our survival.

We floundered through the huge breakers and across the razor-sharp coral and found ourselves clinging to the shattered remains of our raft, being swept past the island into night and certain death.

We were overcome with despair as we could see houses on land and moored vessels. This island off Vietnam was inhabited. To be so close and yet so far was just not fair. We spotted a small boat heading out to sea but not coming in our direction. We just didn't have the energy to even wave at them. When hope of them spotting us was just about all gone the boat turned expertly into the waves and the weather and headed directly to us.

They had seen us and were on their way to rescue us.

We were saved. I was crying tears of joy. From the moment I was lifted naked from the sea and laid gently on the decks of this boat and until our departure from the island seven days later, we received the total care and compassion of this island's population. The islanders too had been affected by the same typhoon, disrupting their supplies coming from the mainland. All the basics were in short supply. But they shared everything they had. Bedding, food, care, fresh water, medicine.

So strange to think that only a few years before Australians were at war with these people. It brings me to think that humans really are forgiving, compassionate and caring. War and conflict are often pushed onto us from higher places with different agendas than the vast majority. When it was time to depart, it seemed the whole population was at the hospital to say goodbye, everybody was crying and for a moment I didn't want to leave these beautiful people. They had risked their lives in rescuing us, taken us in and cared for our

needs without question or complaint and wanted nothing in return. This is the real and good side of humankind and this natural trait should be fostered and taught to all.

When we were rescued on the island my weight was down to a meagre 43 kilos. I was just bones, organs and skin. I told you I was getting littler and littler.

While I was recuperating on the island for those seven days I was thinking back to our planning and preparation period in Hong Kong. A few things were starting to become apparent to me and I needed to get them straight in my mind.

We knew the boat had been in dock for some time and that much of the mechanics needed to be loosened up, but I couldn't help remembering the number of strange comments we got from the locals about 'that boat.' In fact, when I think back, there were quite a few alarm bells that went off that should have caused me concern. The businessman who hired me to bring the boat back to Sydney, Kurt, was quite generous with his offer, but struggled to finance a plane ticket for S**** and I to get to Hong Kong until about 10 minutes before the plane left. I must have been so relieved to get underway that I didn't really think too much about that.

But then there was another odd incident. When we were in Hong Kong and after getting the boat 'ship-shape' we needed to organize insurance for the boat. I'd arranged for the same assessor to give the boat the once-over that had provided the same review when Kurt originally bought the boat a few years before. I was updating Kurt later that night about where we were up to and referred to the insurance assessor who was coming the next day. His worried reaction surprised me. He ordered me to cancel the inspection immediately and get someone else. I thought it was a little bit strange, but we had to obey the boss. I cancelled the inspection, got someone else, and the insurance papers were signed.

I should have asked questions. I should have had a think about Kurt's response. But again, I was too focused on getting the job done, getting back home. I was

biased towards my desire to get underway. I was seeing what I wanted to see. And this proved to be very dangerous. I was being over-confident and common sense should have prompted me to re-think what was happening here. I suppose I wanted to appear too competent and confident in what I was doing and spending time scratching my head about a couple of things wasn't a good look, I thought.

My ego wanted me to appear masterful, compliant and a man of action. This clearly got in the way of seeing the red flags.

I'm not sure what conclusion I would have come to if I had stopped and considered these little warning signs. I'm not sure whether I would have had a re-think if I didn't have a goal to get home by Christmas. What if I didn't have that desirability bias? I know for sure, that next time I feel something is not quite right, I'm going to 100% ask questions no matter what my desire goal might be.

There might be a little consideration there for all decision-makers. Sometimes advice and directions can be blindly accepted because they match our desirable goal; and being agreeable suits the impression that we want to give. You all would have just heard me tell a personal story about a tragic experience that could have been avoided if my desires and ego didn't outweigh what I now know as being prepared to rethink the situation.

But if those alarms bells weren't loud enough the biggest one came from one of our contacts in Hong Kong who was helping us with the initial preparations, Annie. She was a smartly dressed Chinese lady who negotiated our way through Customs, the Registry office and Immigration. As you can imagine this is no simple task, particularly when you aren't a local. We needed a skilled local to help out.

Annie was a great help.

Now that I think back, I can see as clear as day the time Annie and I chatted away as we sat and waited at each Government office. We were patiently

waiting for that magical stamp pad to come out at each officials' desk and give our papers the liberating signature of officialdom.

Annie kept repeating how brave we were to be taking 'that boat' to Australia. Not 'that small boat' and not 'that old boat,' just 'that boat.' I kept on telling her that S**** and I had plenty of experience and it wasn't much of a big deal, really. But Annie's reference to 'that boat' did strike me as a bit odd.

It was all so obvious now.

The stamps on our passports showed that I had twenty-four hours to depart. Not a minute too soon, I thought at the time, because I remember looking at the sky and could see some weather on the way. I had been closely monitoring the weather reports all week in the newspapers and on the television and radios. The monsoon was definitely coming, and the signs were visible. In contrast to the warm, clear and windless days earlier in that week, a change was in the air.

So, I do remember getting the final preparation completed with a sense of urgency because we really needed to get underway.

We bid farewell to Annie and clutching our passports tightly, jumped into a cab to go back to the boat. I remember stopping at the boat yard to pay the accounts and thanking everybody for their help. While the bill was being made up, a rather serious looking secretary looked over at me and said,

"So, you're the one taking that boat to Australia?"

Again, with the 'that boat' reference. But again, I ignored it.

Why didn't anyone tell me what they meant? Not only I was about to severely suffer because of my high level of over-confidence and certainty that all was good, it now appears on reflection that I had created an environment of 'don't tell the boss.' I know I wasn't technically Annie's boss, or this boat yard's secretary, but I was in charge of the situation, I knew what I was doing, I was

the expert. Well, that's the sub-message I told these people, and they didn't feel confident enough to challenge that.

This is probably the hardest lesson to be learnt. At the start of this presentation, I reeled off all my experience and expertise and it was that mindset that I was carrying around with me when I started this job.

I had confused confidence with competence and that's something you just can't do on the sea, particularly in a new country, in an unfamiliar boat, across unpredictable seas. It was almost a very tragic example of the impact of ignorance over arrogance. And those of us in all walks of life, in all jobs, in all companies, who think they know more than they actually do are in a club that they don't realise they are in. Such is the definition of membership.

I was in that club. The club consists of people that think they know more about something than most people know, but the chances are they know less than they think. I'm hoping to one day think of a good name for the club.

Going by the looks around the room, you all seem to know at least one person who could possibly be a member of such a club. In fact, you might know someone who could be President of such a club. I could probably think of some politicians that could be considered life members of this club.

The important thing here is that we should strive to not sign up to this club. I encourage people to check in their own mind the areas of expertise that they feel very competent in. And then check in their mind whether they feel over-confident in their knowledge about that same area of expertise. If the answer is a yes, then it is likely that they will stop improving in that area of expertise. And that's the problem.

I returned to Australia and regained my strength and weight and went back to the sea to do what I knew. I felt that I could overcome whatever the sea could challenge me with. I know that I could adjust to just about any circumstance and survive. I knew that the love of my kids will sustain me through any challenge.

However, I wasn't planning to be in that situation again.

Because now I approach everything with greater humility. I seek to reduce my over-confidence so that I don't end up at the bottom of Mt Stupid. My message is to challenge other leaders in the room here to embrace the benefits of doubt and uncertainty. Seek to question your solution and be prepared to rethink your stance.

I didn't get the chance to embrace the joy of being wrong – I was wrong to ignore the tell-tale signs that were there – but there was no joy in acknowledging my mistake while I was being buffeted by some Asian typhoon in a crippled life raft and with no supplies. Best to be prepared to be wrong before the impacts are fully experienced.

Finally, the most humbling experience I had during this ordeal was to open my heart and seek forgiveness for all the wrongs that I had done in my life. I acknowledge that I have brought many of them on with my own trials, as well as having had a few trials forced on me. No point dwelling on those.

But by seeking forgiveness from those that can provide forgiveness, by delivering an unequivocal sorry with no strings attached, I truly feel at peace in my mind and my soul.

And that is now the most important thing in the world to me.