

### Crises and their booby traps

As we all know, Achilles was the son of the union of a mortal with a goddess. As every mother always wants to protect her child from all dangers, she immersed him in a river whose waters would make him immortal, but held onto him by the heel, which is why he became vulnerable at that point (there are versions of the myth where the hero was immersed in dragon's blood, and a leaf stuck to his heel). Hence the words Achilles' heel, showing that regardless of the strength we may feel we have, there is always a way of getting to us. Clearly, the hero in this case, dies with an arrow that exactly hits his weak point.

In 2001, I read "A Síndrome de Aquiles" (The Achilles Syndrome), by journalist Mario Rosa. The book discusses something more topical than ever: the crisis.

In his book, Rosa warns us: "the crisis is showing signs".

Since I read these words, I began to note that before certain storms invade our back yard, they send small messages, that we ignore due to laziness or because we think they do not deserve our attention. Exactly because of this, at the moment when the wind begins to blow violently, we are absolutely unprepared for the thunder claps that follow everywhere, and it only remains for us, as Rosa says, to cope as well as we can with the ensuing devastation. I took the liberty to use his book as a guide to try to draw a map of our personal storms.

Origin: the crisis always comes from outside, even if we think that sometimes it only appears in our souls. Usually, something insignificant that happened in childhood may bring major consequences in mature life.

The crisis arrives to destroy: however much we try, romantically, to associate the word "crisis" to the word "opportunity" (as the Chinese do), that association is only possible when we are prepared for the unexpected. As this is rarely the case, the crisis arrives and begins to crush everything around us.

The truth doesn't help: recently, during the publication of my new book, "Zahir", a Russian dress designer said, in Moscow's widest circulation newspaper, that the story was based on our "love affair" (the muse who inspired it was in fact Christina Lamb, war correspondent of the English newspaper Sunday Times). I was silly enough to send a letter denying it. Practical result: who had not read the original story, heard about it because of the letter. And soon speculations began on how men, when their back is to the wall, always allege innocence.

A problem, however small it may be, can create a gigantic crisis: In Brazil, a case of bribing a director of the national postal service, developed into series of accusations affecting various levels of the federal government. At a wedding, a mere delay in returning from work may be the straw that breaks the camel's back of an entire repressed course of action, which afterwards is hard to contain.

The facts don't count, what counts is how public opinion perceives them: I know a girl whose father hates her mother, they are always going through difficulties, all of them at home fight like cats and dogs – but always in low voices. While the girl has excellent grades at school, while the neighbours don't know anything, while "public opinion" is not enlightened, the impression will be that the world is under control.

Everything becomes devastating ammunition: as a crisis always means words falling on deaf ears, where one doesn't hear what the other is saying, arguments are useless. If you say "I love oranges", the person will understand that you detest potatoes and is insinuating that he is unhappy because exactly that night he was served a plate of potato chips at dinner.

A crisis always involves a symbol: it can be an institution like marriage, a professional career, a company, religion, love, or a code of conduct.

I am ending this matter with the opinion of others who study the subject (Helio Fred Garcia, Professor of Communication of New York University, and Daí Williams, of the Eos Career Service, and a text from the University of South Australia). I have sought to use these specialists' texts from the point of view of the individual crisis, although the greater part refers to political and economic events.

Once a crisis has begun, the worst ways to react are:

A] To ignore the problem. Mary knows that John, her husband, is about to be fired from his job, which will make it hard for the family to survive. However, as John doesn't mention the matter, she pretends she doesn't know.

B] To deny the problem. John, on his side, thinks that with the contacts he has made during life, he will get another opportunity and, therefore, doesn't see that he is in a difficult situation. He forgets that one of the hardest rules of life, said by Jesus, was: "to those that have little, the little they have will be taken from them". At the moment when he loses his job all these contacts will disappear also, because John will no longer have anything to offer in exchange.

C] To refuse to ask for help. John and Mary spent many years together, and know each other extremely well. John's mind is full of problems, because the crisis absorbs all the energies of the human being. Mary perhaps could help him – but pride does not let him share his difficulties. The result is that, unable to think clearly, John sinks further and further into the ocean of his difficulties.

D] To lie or tell half-truths. One day, Mary screws up courage and, when going to bed, asks if something is wrong. John answers: "I'm thinking of changing job". Clearly, from the legal point of view this may be considered true - John, as he is about to be fired, really is thinking about finding a new job. Mary does not anything else. The pressure in John's mind increases, because he suspects that his wife knows something, but now that he has lied, he can no longer use the truth as a way of saving himself.

E] To blame others. John knows that he is a reputable man, that he was always been honest at work and tried to give the best of himself. He thinks his boss is unfair, that he doesn't deserve what is happening. The fact is that perhaps the boss is experiencing the same drama, because all of them are guided by abstract organisations called "companies". Even so, faced by what he considers absurd, instead of keeping a cool head to handle the moment, he thinks that the world is made of evil and cruel people.

F] To overestimate one's own capability: John begins saying that as he has talent, as he is capable of doing this and that, he ends up convincing himself that he is not facing a crisis, but rather a new opportunity. John has a lot of talent, but that is not enough, because he is not ready for the blow, which takes away his breath and his enthusiasm.

Because all the wrong steps were taken, the day arrives and John is sent away. From then on, the family is on the brink of ruin, because of the precious time lost denying disaster.

What to do, then? Well, I have been through many crises in my life and I think I have made all the mistakes described above. Even so, perhaps in the worst of all my crises, friends have appeared. Since then, the first thing I do is, simply, to ask for help. Clearly the final decision will be my full responsibility but, instead of trying to seem strong, I have never regretted showing myself to be vulnerable to my wife and my friends. And when I begin to act like that, my capacity to make mistakes drops a lot, although it continues there, always waiting to strike.

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