



Necessity. The Mother of Invention

Part 1. Capitalising on a Crisis



Isn't it extraordinary how we humans develop superhuman capabilities in the face of daunting threats? Our ingenuity becomes boundless, teams unite with common purpose to crack the most resilient challenges with urgent haste. We even become more caring, community-spirited (NHS-clapping) versions of our former selves.

We rise to the challenge...

The last year has, for most of us, been one of the most challenging in living memory. We have seen superhuman acts of courage and determination from doctors, nurses, carers, centenarian fund raisers and more. Meanwhile, medical researchers have created, developed and tested vaccines faster than anyone dared hope, then rolled them out across the nation at a similar pace; meanwhile, home delivery services have expanded to enable food and provisions to reach every corner of the nation and web developers have launched new solutions ways to enable home working and socialising. Even the most resolute office-dwellers have risen to the challenge of working from home and adapted to holding meetings on-screen via Teams or Zoom (something many would ordinarily have refused to entertain).



Plato was right. Necessity has always given birth to invention. It's in our DNA. Wind the clock back 80 years and we can see another example of it in action (especially for an aviation enthusiast in lockdown).

In 1931, the Hawker aircraft company's latest front-line fighter for the Royal Air Force was the Fury. Designed by a brilliant young engineer, Sydney Camm, it was the RAF's first fighter capable of exceeding 200 mph and could climb to 10,000 feet in under 4 minutes. Then, as war loomed, Camm's team worked round the clock to redesigned the biplane around the latest Merlin engine and reconfigure its canvas-skinned structure into a faster monoplane, called the Hurricane.

Together with the Spitfire, it gave the RAF air superiority in the Battle of Britain. As the war went on, the relentless pace of innovation continued and, by 1942, Camm's team launched the all-metal 'Typhoon' with an engine twice as powerful as the Hurricane's enabling it to fly at over 400mph.

By 1951, just 20 years after launching the pre-war Fury, Camm's team had created a jet fighter that could fly three times as fast and climb seven-times as quickly to twice the altitude.



+20 years



“...the same team that had proudly unveiled the Fury biplane just two decades earlier launched a jet fighter that could fly three times as fast and climb seven-times as quickly to twice the altitude”



Then we relax...

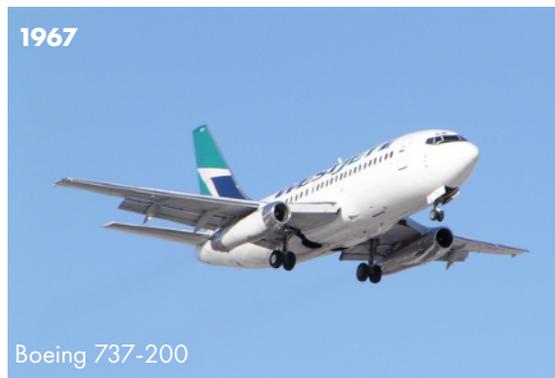
Just as extraordinary, perhaps, is the ease with which, when the threat subsides, we default to ordinary human equilibrium—as if nothing had happened.

So, as the world breathed a sigh of relief after the war, aero engineers set about putting military advances to civil use and, by 1952, the first jet airliner, the de Havilland's Comet went into service. Unfortunately, it had to be grounded with technical problems—the kind of problems that would have been quickly exploited by a military rival in wartime, but for a commercial rival in peacetime the urgency was lost. Boeing spent six years in studious contemplation before finally launching its rival jet airliner, the 707. It was then a further nine years before Boeing introduced a smaller derivative, the 737, for short-haul routes.

Since its launch in 1967 the 737 has developed comparatively modestly—can you spot the difference? What's more, after more than 50 years in production, the latest model is actually 60mph slower than the original.

Who would have thought that the superhuman ingenuity in less than a decade of crisis would be followed by decades of technological torpidity in the era of plenty that followed.

It is sobering to reflect that, had the 1952 Comet airliner been based on a 50 year-old airframe it would have been a hot air balloon (the Wright brothers not having mastered powered flight for another 4 years).



+50 years



“... had the de Havilland Comet been based on a 50 year-old airframe, as the 737 Max was, it would have been a hot air balloon”



Reigniting the spirit...

We have seen that crises, particularly the shared fear of a common enemy, are powerful human motivators (as George Orwell warns us in '1984'). We instinctively go further if we're fighting for survival but, without such an imperative, most of us will settle for doing enough to get by comfortably—which, if you are in an organisation seeking innovative solutions (and which of us is not?), seems like a waste of potential, doesn't it? So, as we emerge from the current crisis, how can we sustain the spirit that has sparked some of us to go that extra superhuman mile over the past year—or reignite it if we have been sidelined by lockdown?

One approach, of course, is to wilfully contrive a workplace so stressful that it triggers employees' elemental survival instincts. This might, potentially, work in a totalitarian 'work or starve' regime, but is hardly relevant in free markets (though, arguably, some seem to have tried). The traditional capitalist solution is one of bribery—rewarding high performance with, say, cash bonuses. Sadly, this has proven, in the long run, to be barely more sustainable (and a lot less effective) than the first approach, because the impact tends to fade over time and the reward becomes the norm (one reason why directors' bonuses have ballooned as companies compete to attract and retain high performers). Over time we get used to a bonus and it becomes a hygiene factor for the function, rather than the motivating factor we need to go beyond it. So, what are the motivating factors that will make a difference?

It could be that the answer lies in our feeling part of something something 'bigger than ourselves', something that captures our imagination and drives our ambition, inspiring us to go further? Simon Sinek might describe it as 'finding our why'. It happens when we are engaged with a company, cause or purpose (let's call it a brand) with which we feel an emotional connection. A brand that gets us out of bed in the morning, that we would support even if we weren't being paid to. A brand that reflects and encapsulates the mission and core values of the organisation we work for—as opposed to a set of promises dreamt-up by the marketing team, then superimposed upon it. A brand that lives in the HR director's domain as much as the Marketing director's, that consistently shapes and reflects both culture and communications and which employees can relate to as readily as customers. Organisations like this are rare, but they do exist. Not surprisingly, they frequently attract the best talent, who often do the best work of their lives while working there—you might say the brand becomes their chosen necessity. And, for all their flaws in other respects, such organisations buzz with dedicated individuals giving birth to inventive ideas that might just change the world. Incidentally, before he died, Sir Sydney Camm was planning the design of an aircraft to travel at Mach 4. The man who, aged 10, had been inspired by the Wright brothers first flight never stopped inventing.

Who are the people and what are the brands that continually inspire us to go the extra mile? What is their secret?

(See Part 2)



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