

# BUSINESS IN THE DANGER ZONE

Following his recent tours of South America and Iran, COLIN TURNER looks at the lessons for UK business owners

Hearing gunfire during the night alerted me to the fact that Honduras is the most murderous country in the world. With 27 per cent unemployment, 50 per cent of the population below the poverty line and rife with corruption, I questioned myself again why I had elected to come here. I had agreed to meet those business leaders responsible for generating seven per cent annual growth – which seemed far removed from the reality before me. How were they able to do so?

Being driven from my hotel in Tegucigalpa (Teyusi yalpa) that had witnessed a late night shootout resulting in two bodies lying in the road, I noticed that armed guards stood nonchalantly outside the larger places of business. “Normal way of life”, my host assured me as he manoeuvred his truck through the chaotic traffic. “Protection from protection. That is from the gangs, and other forms of impositions.”

Indeed recent statistics confirm that there are two murders each and every day in a city employing around 330,000 people. To place in comparative context, London’s Square Mile also employs 330,000. Imagine almost 792 murders a year there – what impact would that have on our business thinking?

It transpired that apparently my visit had been so successful in generating such a good response that it had attracted the attention of the authorities that had taken the opportunity to impose an additional tax. This unexpected imposition – never before placed on education – presented yet another challenge for my host.

Spending time with 450 business leaders from Honduras re-confirmed to me the positive attitude that exists among entrepreneurs and business owners in what the west terms third-world countries.

I asked them if they were at all concerned about the euro-crisis that US papers that day had stated was threatening global economic stability. The response was that whatever happened was beyond their control so they would not waste a moment of thought on it.

I asked them if they believed that the next

12-month period would prove to more economically beneficial for them than the previous 12 months. The response was yes of course – it is what keeps us going.

I asked them if they blamed the government. The response was that they strived to do the best they could, because there was no other alternative. They focused on what they could do, whatever it involved overcoming, because their business was the only thing that promised to make a difference to their lives, families, employees, people and country. They only focused on what could be done, never what could not be done, and they always aimed to excel at it.

One shared how his friend had built up a restaurant group of 35 outlets selling fried chicken. Indeed I had noticed the ‘Pollo’ signs throughout the city. With 350 people employed he had plans to diversify and employ more. Then the government suddenly raised the electricity bills to an all time high.

Knowing that lobbying and fighting was a waste of time, his friend adopted what many have done in Latin America with positive results. He went on hunger strike. He had been on it for three days by the time of my arrival, committed to saving the jobs of his people, his company and the business community.

The fact is that these business communities have significantly more challenges to overcome than others. Yet they have no choice other than to get on and do the best they can without complaint. To do whatever it takes to overcome corruption and beat the odds of being murdered.

Before my arrival at Honduras I had left the even poorer country of Guatemala, where similarly business expectations were bright

despite the huge poverty and corruption. The presidential cavalcade arrived as I was leaving my hotel and I had to walk the gauntlet of heavily armed guards. Such circumstance put business problems in perspective. Because that is what business is about: solving problems.



Currently the papers report that Iran is one of the most dangerous places to visit. The reality was different during my recent tour. 73 million people of a generally helpful and friendly culture are being pigeon-holed into something to be avoided.

The 12 million commuters in Tehran are as frustrated with their government as commuters are in London. Industrial cities in the south were as worried as UK Manufacturers having to contend with lack of support and heavy bureaucracy. Young people (and half the population is under 25) in Religious cities in North East Iran at the border to



Afghanistan hold earnest ambitions about their future. Business owners in Isfahan dream of successful business, not nuclear holocaust.

Business owners there live with the challenge of not even the slightest hope of government support. Most people I met had

two jobs and worked a minimum of 12 hours a day in order to get by. Money was tight and luxury non-existent for most. Without doubt the reasons for complaining are at a far higher level than the western world.

We need to get a perspective about our economic woes. Yes they exist. But they are of our own making. And therefore will be of our own resolution. We are lucky to have the opportunity to overcome challenges that will develop our potential.

If you don't agree then spend a week in a third world country and be embarrassed about the positive enthusiasm they have for the future. They are poor but they have goals, dreams and focus on what they can do. Despite the obstacles, they have an unshakeable belief in the concept that whatever you creatively conceive, boldly believe and passionately pursue, you will achieve. Does your business?

Business is a great arena to test our mettle and build courage, resilience and determination. What is important is that you are master of where your business will take you, and not its slave that carries you along to nowhere.

Over 100 businesses, for example, are forced to cease trading every single working day in the UK. Nobody starts with that plan in mind, yet seldom does a monitored plan actually exist. And perhaps that is the main point, because to revisit that proven worthy adage: When you fail to actually develop a watertight plan, you must be, by definition, actually be planning to fail.

But a secondary point of value is that business is about learning from mistakes...

we become the person we are through learning curves.

They are the furnaces in which our mettle is tempered into cutting edge steel. Without them we remain dull iron. The secret is to embrace and learn from them, and above all harness those curves towards greater heights.

Business is the great arena that provides us the opportunity to focus on what we can do. It is not for causing us to apportion blame for why we cannot do what we are capable of achieving, despite the hurdles that lie ahead.

For me there is an over-riding memory from The Asian Crisis of 1997 that resulted in almost worldwide economic meltdown. It

was not the reasons sparking the financial contagion. It was the unprecedented and unanimous support by the whole of the Thai people.

The Thai Baht had ignited the crisis and with the country collapsing the whole population gave freely of their gold and possessions to save their country. Their actions worked.

Imagine that happening in the west, where pushing apart rather than pulling together is the considered option. One that apportions blame over seeking solution.

The fact is that blame looks backward, whereas responsibility looks forward. Business in the danger zone is the harsh arena that accepts such responsibility. The responsibility to do whatever it takes, such as the owner of the Pollo Group in Honduras, whose actions reduced the electricity rates and saved 350 jobs after 10 days of hunger strike.

I am not proposing for one moment we take such action. The point is to get things into perspective and take the step towards our challenges, whatever they are. Running a business has its ups and downs, and sometimes an unexpected event will come your way beyond your control and influence, causing you to feel like you are stuck in a downward spiral. You know you will survive, that you will win through because that is who you are. True success lies in accepting, and then taking command of the ups and downs that come your way. To not do so is to place our business in jeopardy – a danger zone of our own making.



Colin Turner

Business guru and mentor, Professor Colin Turner, is the author of 18 business books published in 45 languages and holds Trusted Advisor Status with his CEO clients