



## STORIES TRAINERS TELL

### 7.1 on the Richter Scale

#### Contributor

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Mary is the president of M. B. Wacker Associates, a firm specializing in leadership development, team performance coaching, customer service strategies, and organizational change consulting. Since 1988, her firm has worked with health care, finance, legal, insurance, publishing, distribution, and utility industries; education; government; and community-based agencies. Her work on team building has been cited in Milwaukee's *Business Journal* and in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. Mary also directs Leadership Milwaukee, a program focusing on diversity in community leadership. She has a B.S. degree in psychology and an M.S. degree in educational psychology, both from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

#### Type and Purpose(s)

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Crucible; encourage and evoke

#### Background

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In this situation Mary learns how a single experience can draw people together through a common bond independent of their geographical proximity to one another.

#### Presentation Tips

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There are several characters in the story—portray them all a bit differently through vocal changes. When telling the story it is okay to eliminate the “he says, she says” phrases and move directly into character dialogue.

#### Set-up

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**Option 1**—When we aren't in control of our circumstances we need to rely on those around us.

**Option 2**—What can crisis teach us?

## 7.1 on the Richter Scale

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There was a low rumbling. I thought it was the garage door opening and wondered if Linda's husband was coming home. The noise didn't subside. In fact, the rumbling grew louder and louder! And suddenly the house began to rock on its foundation. I saw floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows move in a wavelike motion as plants and pottery crashed to the floor. "Earthquake!" Linda cried, "Everyone out of the house." This was easier said than done for Linda—our instructor—who was eight months pregnant with her first child and climbing two levels of steps from her business conference center. Just moments before we had all been meeting there for our seminar. We rushed to help her and our little group reassembled outside her home. I grabbed at my husband, Alan, who had just arrived to pick me up at the end of the day. "Whatever is happening, thank God we're together," I thought.

Linda was an organization development consultant in Berkeley, California, conducting a weeklong certification for six of us eager colleagues. This was the second-to-last day and we were an intimate group by this time, meeting in Linda's home conference center and making Peet's Coffee runs every morning. The seminar topic, you ask? Managing complex change. And boy, were we in for the case study of our lives!

It was 5:00 P.M., October 17, 1989, and we were smack in the middle of one of the worst earthquakes this country had experienced in decades. Seven-point-one on the Richter scale! Our stricken group huddled around the car radio, and we heard the moment-by-moment breaking news. Several miles away, the World Series was being played at Candlestick Park with the Goodyear Blimp floating helplessly overhead. Chaos reigned as thousands upon thousands of fans poured out of the stadium. Only moments before, a section of the Bay Bridge had crashed, taking several cars along with it and stranding workers who were just leaving their downtown offices. Sirens pierced the air. The Marina District was in shambles. On the other side of the Bay, within minutes, the Oakland freeway had had become the world's largest parking lot.

Arriving back at our hotel, we found no power, no water, and a piece of ceiling occupying our bed. We remembered Linda saying, "you can count on me if

you need a place to stay,” and we decided to take her up on her generous offer. Fortunately, her home had been built to handle earthquakes! Several of us camped out on various levels and pulled tortellini out of the freezer to accommodate the crowd for dinner. It was immensely comforting to be together while we listened to the various news reports on the injuries and damage. We all hugged long and hard before going to bed that night. We were in this together.

The next morning, I was desperate to get home to Milwaukee for a speaking obligation I had early the next day. In my fifteen years in training, I’d never missed a seminar and I wasn’t about to break my record. But the airports were still closed and it was painfully obvious I was stuck! Travel by any means—except horse or donkey—was completely out of the question. Options raced through my brain at the speed of light. Out of nowhere, Paul popped into my head. He owed me one! Paul was a fellow consultant and I had once taken over his university class when he’d had car trouble. Time to call Paul. Well, outgoing lines just weren’t to be had. The world was trying to call San Francisco. It took two hours of continual dialing but I finally got through. “Paul, I’m stranded in San Francisco and I need help!” I cried. He responded, “You can count on me.”

After coaching Paul for an hour and going over the logistics, I knew my seminar was in good hands. Once again, I felt the gift of trust and being connected in times of crisis. Then I called my conference coordinator. “Lee,” I said, “guess where I am? San Francisco!” Without missing a beat, Lee asked, “Mary, how is it in shake-and-bake land?” It was good to laugh. I again experienced the warmth of connecting to another person I could count on.







We finally made it home the day of the seminar by taking the red-eye flight out of San Francisco. As I fell into bed, too tired to sleep, I reflected on all the special people who had come together during this crisis, willing to step in to make whatever was needed happen: Linda, her husband, Alan, Paul, Lee, and the countless others who had supported me during this ordeal. More than a seminar on complex change could ever teach. I learned firsthand how a single experience can draw people together through a common bond. As I drifted off to sleep, I remembered all those who had said, “You can count on me.” I wondered why it takes a catastrophic

event for people to show their unconditional support and warmth for each other. I made a promise not to wait for the next crisis to show those who matter to me how much I care about them. They can “count on me.”




[Reflect on your life for a moment. Who are you able to count on for help and support? More importantly, how often can they count on you?]

## Debrief Questions

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-  What motivated the people that Mary called to offer their support and assistance?
-  What did Mary do to manage her emotional reaction to the catastrophe and her inability to travel home in time to teach?
-  What are all the things that Mary learned from this experience?
-  If you had been Mary, would you have taken the same course of action that she did? Why or why not?
-  What is your initial response when faced with a crisis? How does this change (or not change) as the crisis progresses?
-  What implications does this story have for your organization? Your department?

### Key: Three Levels of Debrief Questions

-  **The Story:** What the story means—its moral or main lesson. What the story characters have experienced.
-  **The Learner:** How the participant feels about the story and how it personally applies to the individual.
-  **The Organization or World:** How the story applies to the participant’s work group, department, business unit, division, organization, industry, or to society-at-large.

## Key Point Options

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1. Sometimes a crisis presents no warning signs. In these situations it is more difficult to be prepared for the unexpected, especially if you are in unfamiliar surroundings.
2. Part of dealing with an unexpected crisis is to identify and analyze the risks and to figure out ways to mitigate or eliminate them.
3. In attempting to solve the problems brought on by unexpected circumstances, it is important to maintain emotional balance and to reach out to all who can help. Do not put limitations on your thinking regarding who to contact. Directly ask them for assistance.

## Follow-up Activities

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**Step 1**—Small-Group Activity: Identify five different crises that could occur in your work group. Then identify what specific types of problems could result from each of them. Following this, list all of the people or organizations that could be called upon to assist. Record these items on easel paper.

**Step 2**—Large-Group Discussion: Have the small groups report on their work. Ask the entire group: What is the optimal way to ask for assistance in these situations? What is the best way to respond if people seem reticent to assist?

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