

# Entrepreneur

## What Rebuilding After Disasters Taught Me About Leading Through Crisis

Most companies don't fail from disruption — they fail from complacency.

BY [SHELDON YELLEN](#) • EDITED BY [CHELSEA BROWN](#) • Oct 07, 2025

### Key Takeaways

- The market shifts — but complacency does the real damage.
- Leaders must challenge the status quo, foster a people-first culture and innovate in calm (not just in crisis).
- It's also important to provide clarity and transparency when uncertainty arises, plan ahead and stand on your values.

According to [PwC's 2024 CEO Survey](#), nearly half of CEOs are unsure their companies will survive the next decade without reinvention. While a sobering statistic, it's not surprising.

I've seen what happens when businesses grow [complacent](#) — when they confuse stability with sustainability. Economies shift. Disasters strike. People exit. Trends change. The question isn't whether disruption will come. It's whether you've got the courage and grit to execute, embrace and inspire when it does happen.

At BELFOR, our teams activate and rebuild homes, schools and businesses after disasters. But the real work starts long before the floodwaters rise or the fires burn. It starts with [mindset](#) — refusing to get comfortable and living with an “all the time...can do...will do...whatever it takes to do...culture.” That's how we rebuild communities.

Let me be clear: I'm not an economist or a futurist. I'm just a guy who grew up in Detroit, started working young and learned the hard way how to adapt when life throws curveballs. As I like to say: Got a plan? Well, get ready, because real life has a way of torching the playbook.

That perspective has shaped every decision I've made as CEO of BELFOR, a company that now spans 49 countries and employs more than 13,000 team members. Through decades of [economic turbulence](#) and natural disasters, we've progressed — not just because of what we do, but because of how we think. Our culture of constant adaptation has helped fuel growth.

# The market shifts — but complacency does the real damage

I believe that no matter what your role is in a company, complacency has no seat at the table. For example, I keep my office walls bare — not because I don't care about our company's achievements, but because I never want to forget that things can change in an instant. By not hanging decor, it's a constant reminder that I've never quite "settled in." And I don't want to ever settle!

Success can blur your mirrors. When things are good and the road feels smooth, it's tempting to ease off the gas. Real [resilience](#) is keeping your hands on the wheel and eyes on the road, even when everything looks fine. Complacency could very well cause you to crash.

Netflix is a perfect example. We all remember those bright red envelopes showing up at our doors. But when the digital wave hit, Netflix didn't cling to the past; it [adapted to survive](#). The company has disrupted itself again and again, from mailing DVDs to streaming to creating its own award-winning content. Today, it's an entertainment empire. That relentless mindset of evolution isn't just innovation. It's domination.

## From spare change to game change

I never thought I'd be running a multibillion-dollar business. I grew up in Detroit, the oldest of four boys, raised by a single mom. I started working at 11, and every dollar I made went straight to her to help keep the family afloat. The first tip I ever earned was \$1 from waiting tables. I spent a dime of it to call my mom, proud to share the news. She lit me up for wasting 10% of my earnings. Lesson learned, quick.

From flipping burgers and shining shoes to stocking vending machines, my early jobs taught me how to hustle, listen and [stay humble](#). And when I finally got my start at BELFOR, I didn't walk into a leadership role. I started at the bottom and worked my way up.

Those experiences shaped how I lead today. Resilience isn't a corporate strategy — it's something you live. And when you come from nothing, you never forget what it took to get where you are.

## 1. Push past predictable

When we stop pushing ourselves, we stop growing. That's true in both business and in life. Resilience starts with leaders who [challenge the status quo](#), not out of fear, but out of commitment to long-term relevance. Create space for hard conversations. Challenge your assumptions. Disrupt your habits before the market disrupts you.

## 2. People first isn't a policy; it's a culture

There's no success without people. They fight with you in crisis and guard against it before it starts.

At BELFOR, I personally send a handwritten birthday card to every team member each year. It's not a gimmick; it's a reminder that we see every person as family. And when a crisis hits, whether it's a hurricane or a personal emergency, people who feel supported show up with everything they've got. Because our [people feel valued](#), they're less inclined to resist change and necessary disruption. In fact, they embrace it and rise to it.

This approach is more crucial than ever. According to Gallup, employee engagement in the U.S. fell to a [10-year low in 2024](#), with only 31% of employees engaged and 17% actively disengaged. This decline underscores the importance of fostering a supportive and engaging work environment where people feel like people, not numbers.

## 3. Innovate in calm, not just crisis

I've learned the worst time to start building a plan is when you're already in the storm. Innovation shouldn't only be reactive. In fact, some of our best ideas have come during quieter seasons when we had the bandwidth to experiment, rethink and build for the future.

Remember how Netflix didn't wait for a crisis to innovate? It created its own momentum. Resilient businesses prepare before they're forced to.

## 4. Keep things simple and be radically transparent

When [uncertainty arises](#), clarity matters more than ever. Complex plans and vague messaging fall apart quickly in a crisis. As leaders, we owe it to our teams to be honest, direct and accessible. In fact, [88% of leaders](#) surveyed by Deloitte agree that increased transparency leads to greater workforce trust.

In my experience, companies that overcomplicate things are often trying to mask fear. But fear thrives in confusion. If you don't know something, say so. If you're adjusting plans, explain why. Trust grows when people feel informed and included.

## 5. Strong leaders plan ahead — and stand on values

At BELFOR, we've seen how fast the ground can shift. Floods, fires, pandemics, we've responded to it all. The most resilient leaders we work with aren't the ones who have rigid strategies. They're the ones who can [pivot](#) while staying grounded in their values.

We build contingency plans like anyone else. But we also inspire our leaders to make [value-driven decisions](#) under pressure. Fast action isn't useful if it's not aligned with who you are and what you stand for.

## Thriving means choosing discomfort before it chooses you

Resilience isn't something you build once. It's a muscle. And like any muscle, it only grows when you push it — when you step outside your [comfort zone](#) and do the work before the world demands it of you.

If you're a business owner reading this, I challenge you to start now. Not when the news gets worse. Not when the numbers dip. Now. Ask yourself: Where have I gotten too comfortable? What assumptions am I making about my team, my industry, my future?

The secret to long-term success isn't just riding out the storm — it's letting it forge your strength. And the ones who come out strongest aren't those who simply endure, but those who prepare and adapt long before the clouds roll in.



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Sheldon Yellen is the CEO of BELFOR, the global leader in property restoration and disaster recovery, overseeing a \$3+ billion company with more than 13,000 team members across 550 offices worldwide.