**The Cost of Winning**

**By Nigel Hudson**

Nigel Hudson: multi award-winning bid professional, leader of teams, winner of £3bn of new business, boaster of a 98% win rate, capability builder, thought leader and personal development expert. Wow. What a superhero. Let me tell you the other side of the story.

Back in 1999, while working as a marketing copywriter, I was introduced to the world of bidding. “Fancy writing a bid, Nige?” said the Sales Manager. “I reckon you’d be really good at it. It’s a high pressure, high-adrenaline role that favours those who love ‘pure challenge’. You’re obsessed with customer value and crafting a compelling story, you relish taking on seemingly impossible tasks and have the stamina to emerge victorious when others have fallen. I think you’d enjoy and be energised by this activity. But be warned: bidding is a deadline-driven environment where you ‘do what you do’ to get the job done. There’s no 9-5 working, instead you graft hard – often ‘giving your all’ – to close the deal. If that means slogging it out through the night, or all weekend, or cancelling holiday, or selling your soul to please the client, then that’s what you do. This is the activity that feeds the business, so if you don’t do everything you can to win, then the business will starve and we’ll all suffer. I’m looking to you to be my white knight.” Crikey, this would be a full-on job. I gave it a go, writing a proposal that didn’t win. (The contract was awarded to the company that was best friends with the client and had written the RFP.) But I learned from my mistakes and got progressively better until I was winning virtually everything I bid.

In 2007 I was recruited to help set up and coach what would become one of the world’s most successful bid teams, growing it from four people to a global team of 220 in 2014. I loved this environment, as everyone was so passionate about winning (success breeds success, and the thrill of the chase is addictive), and I relished the world where ‘normal isn’t normal’. I was working 100 hours per week, managing up to 22 concurrent bids, mentoring up to a dozen people at a time, and ‘filling the gap’ left by ineffective salespeople during customer presentations and negotiations. In short, I was being a typically kind-hearted bid manager. Burnout, however, was inevitable.

In June 2014, I experienced my third breakdown in ten years.

I’m going to describe the build-up of what happened so that – should you experience similar symptoms – you’ll recognise them, know your limits, and be able to ease off before things get worse. Ready? Here we go:

Adrenaline is good. It helps to spark us into action when we face a ‘fight or flight’ situation. This is fine in the short term, enabling us to focus more and work harder, but it’s only a short-term fix. With bidding, we’re often in a constant state of stress driven by a mixture of internal and external deadlines and stakeholder pressures. Adrenaline sustained me for the first three years of my bidding career, but then I became tired and fuzzy-headed. Ocular migraines (a ‘waterfall’ sensation in one’s vision, combined with headaches and nausea) were common. I wasn’t as alert or clear thinking as before, moving slowly and having trouble remembering names and actions. I was working twenty-hours a day, so didn’t have the luxury of getting a good night’s sleep, so I resorted to caffeine tablets to keep me going. Just a few at first, then, as my fatigue grew, taking up to twenty a day washed down with energy drinks. Caffeine killed my appetite, so I skipped meals and just ate biscuits, crisps and chocolates at my desk. All that sugar? I grew a ‘bid manager biscuit belly’, putting on three stone and becoming chronically unfit. I ended up in hospital, having collapsed in the bathroom with blood pouring from my backside. The diagnosis? Caffeine had scorched away my stomach lining. I gave up the tablets, but not the energy drinks or commitment to deadlines. Coffee was more socially acceptable in the workplace, so I purchased a double espresso every thirty minutes of the day from the on-campus coffee shop. These drinks kept me going, helping to sustain my reputation as being ‘the highest energy, nicest and most enthusiastic bid manager you’ll ever meet’. But I was pale skinned and vitamin depleted from lack of sunlight, and scared stiff by ‘fluttery’ heart palpitations and savagely-painful chest spasms. Also, my behaviour was becoming unpredictable. Normally happy and amenable, I was becoming argumentative, impatient, disrespectful and intolerant of others’ views, and seeing everything as a crisis. I began ranting and seeking to intimidate anyone who got in my way. My actions reduced two colleagues to tears. Realising that I couldn’t trust myself to behave rationally, I elected to work from home. There, with the phone ringing relentlessly and a hundred emails landing in my inbox every hour, I sat at my desk, numb to everything and barely able to lift a limb. My wife encouraged me to see a doctor, who explained that the reason for my near-inability to pick up the phone, or react to my environment, was because my adrenal gland was depleted and temporarily unable to produce more adrenaline. “You could be standing in the middle of the road,” said the doctor, “with a juggernaut approaching you, and you’d be unable to jump to safety – even though your mind would be screaming for you to escape.” He also educated me about how people react to stress, in that we either become a more intense version of our self or behave in the opposite way to normal. “If you like detail, you might find yourself delving deeper and deeper into the detail; or if you’re nice then you might become nasty.” I was signed off work for two weeks, prescribed a four-month course of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, and told to take a holiday.

I returned to work and was immediately instructed to attend training courses on stress management. The best of these was called ‘Turning Stress into Resilience’ run by two coaches from the British Olympic Association. It taught me that, in addition to maintaining one’s fitness and endorphin levels through daily exercise (“if it doesn’t make you sweat and lose your breath, you haven’t done enough”), managing stress is a straightforward ‘biological’ task: that how we think and behave is a result of how our brain processes information. If it isn’t getting a consistent supply of oxygen (blood) then it cannot perform properly. That’s why we occasionally ‘see red’ or act ‘without thinking’. The way to ensure clear thought? “Stay adequately hydrated and remain calm,” they said. “If your heart’s beating regularly then your brain will receive the consistent flow of blood it needs.” I learned that my pulse could be slowed to a steady rhythm by sitting still and breathing deeply and slowly. The technique worked great until I went to the office on 28 May – my birthday. I was about to leave at 6pm, so that I could enjoy a birthday meal with my wife, when a customer emailed me with their demands for a BAFO submission by 7am the following morning. I would have to cancel my celebrations, get my team back into the office, and work through the night. I did all this and submitted the proposal on time. And then the same thing happened the following night, and every night for five months. I keep going, ‘doing what I do’. But I felt like the world was conspiring against me. When the customer – a car manufacturer – finally accepted our 100th BAFO, I was hailed as a hero for bringing satellite navigation to vehicles in Europe. But a colleague had suffered a fatal heart attack during the process and my marriage was in tatters. Was it worth the sacrifice? I vowed that no customer, colleague, competitor or supplier would ever force me or my team to give so much again. My vow, and health, was short-lived.

In June 2014 I woke at home to find my body aching so much that I could barely move. I managed to roll out of bed in an attempt to get up and dressed for another day of ‘bidding excellence’. I landed with a thump on the floor, then pulled myself vertical by hanging onto the bedside table. It contained my socks, so I removed a pair from the top drawer, but couldn’t remember, or figure out, how to put them on my feet. I turned to my wife, who was lying in bed, and – while doing my best to breathe – attempted to tell her that something terrible was happening. Then a young girl ran into my bedroom, singing ‘Morning Daddy’. I didn’t know who she was, nor could I remember ever having a daughter. With my heart pounding my ribcage, I collapsed on the floor and crawled under the bed.

Seven hours later, I was sitting in a hospital room with a doctor standing next to me. She was speaking to someone on the telephone, saying words that included “anxiety disorder”, “depression”, “bipolar”, “psychotic episode”, “risk”, “danger”, and was insisting that I be detained for the safety of myself and those around me. She then ended the call and spoke to me, explaining that the other person on the phone was a consultant who had convinced her that I would not be a threat to society so long as I agreed to a programme of medication. This seemed like a better alternative to being sectioned, so I agreed to take the anti-depressant and antipsychotic drugs. They made me sleep almost non-stop for six months and then exist without internal thought for a further four months.

I’d lost my mind in order to win.

When I finished the medication and returned to work, I was calmer, more controlled, and more aware of the best way for me to win ‘on my terms’. I’d previously been too keen to say yes, too hungry for success, too loyal to my cause, too keen to prove myself, too scared to stand up to my managers, too ‘compliant’ to challenge a customer, too proud to ask for help, and too stupid to learn at the same pace as I was moving. I would now say “no” to the noise of urgency and “yes” to what was important, which would enable me to stop ‘doing the doing’ and instead manage through others. My mission was (and still is) to encourage and empower people through training, coaching, mentoring, writing and public speaking, to find ‘the thing’ that makes them brilliant, so they can play to their strengths while never allowing themselves to do things that compromise their well-being.

We bidders inherently give our all, but absolute focus should only be given to that which matters absolutely. Be grateful for everything you experience; it provides opportunities for you and others to learn. But take ownership of your actions. As I learnt from my illness: “The only person to blame for your situation is you”. You’re not fully in control if you blame others for something that you could have influenced for the better. Create a culture of winning, but do it on your terms. Remember: say “no” to that which will drag you down, and “yes” to that which will make you brilliant. Play to your strengths. Be smart. Win, but not at all costs.