Carry On As Planned

Why The Most Dangerous Decision Is The One Nobody's Allowed To Make.

MIKE THOMAS · FOUNDER & DIRECTOR · 6 MIN READ

Not long ago, I was hired as a freelancer to run a canyoning session. It had been raining for days — the kind of relentless, saturating rain Hong Kong has been getting far too much of lately.

The warning signs were stacked up before we even started. Another provider working in the same area had cancelled their activity that morning, judging the conditions too dangerous. I'd said much the same to the people I was working with. But the call came back down the line: carry on. So we did.

We were maybe a third of the way up the canyon when the water level began to rise. Not gradually — dramatically, and fast. A flash flood, building in front of us. We used river-crossing techniques to get off the low ground and onto something safer, and everyone came out unhurt. But it was, to put it mildly, nerve-wracking. And the honest truth is that we should never have been in there.

Here is what has stayed with me since. The rain didn't put us in that canyon. A decision did — or more accurately, the absence of one.

A Decision Not Made Is Still a Decision

We tend to picture a dangerous decision as an action: someone actively choosing the risky thing. But in a changing environment, the more common failure is the opposite. It's the decision that never gets made. The plan simply continues, on autopilot, long after conditions have moved out from under it.

"Carry on as planned" feels like the safe, neutral option. In a static environment, it often is. But conditions outdoors are rarely static, and the moment they cross a line the plan was never written for, carrying on stops being neutral. It becomes the risk — and nobody chose it. It just happened, because no one stepped in to change it.

There's a name for one version of this: analysis paralysis, where people weigh options endlessly and, in doing so, decide nothing. But it wears other disguises too. *It's not my place to call it. The person in charge hasn't said anything.* Silence in a moment where someone should have spoken up. Each of these produces the same output — the world changes, and the plan doesn't move with it.

The absence of a decision is itself a decision. It just isn't one anybody feels responsible for. And that is precisely what makes it dangerous.

The People Who Can See, and the People Who Can Decide

A while ago, on a windy day, I was walking my dogs near a bay and watched small boats being flipped by the gusts. When I reached the beach, a staff member from a group about to go kayaking asked me, half-joking, "Would you take a group out in this?"

"No," I said. "And neither should you." Their own risk assessment set the limit at a force four. What we were standing in was a force five, gusting six.

They agreed. Then they did the natural thing — they called their superiors to ask. And the instruction that came back was to carry on, just keep the kayaks close to the beach. In the end it was a washout; after a token attempt to get on the water, they abandoned it and played games on the sand instead.

Here's the thing about that phone call: it should never have needed to happen. Or rather, if a call was going to be made at all, it should not have been a question — *should we continue?* — but a statement: *here is what we're changing the plan to.*

This is the gap where risk quietly accumulates. The person who can actually see the conditions, read the water, and watch the group is often not the person empowered to change anything. And the person with the authority to change the plan frequently cannot see any of it — they're in an office, on the end of a phone, working from a forecast that's already out of date. Information sits in one place. Authority sits in another. And the weather doesn't wait for the two to be reconciled.

> *The person watching the water rise should be the person allowed to make the call.*

When Following the Plan Is the Breach

There's a further layer here that pushes this out of the realm of judgement and into the realm of liability.

Risk assessments and standard operating procedures are written for expected conditions. They set thresholds — wind limits, water levels, ratios, egress points — precisely so someone can look up from the situation and know when a line has been crossed. But once it's crossed, following the plan and breaching the plan become the same act. Carrying on is no longer compliance. It's the opposite.

Broadly speaking, negligence is typically established when four elements are present together: a **duty of care** — a responsibility to ensure the safety of others; a **breach** of that duty — failing to meet the standard of a reasonable person or professional; **causation** — that breach directly leading to harm; and **damages** — an actual loss occurring. The first two are worth sitting with, because both were plainly in place in the situations above. There was a duty of care, and carrying on breached it. In the canyon, another provider — a reasonable professional by any measure — had already judged the conditions unsafe and pulled out. On the beach, the risk assessment itself, presumably written by a reasonable professional, said the activity should not run in those winds. In each case, carrying on didn't just carry risk. It ran directly against the standard those very decisions and documents had set.

NEGLIGENCE — ESTABLISHED ONLY WHEN ALL FOUR ARE PRESENT	
DUTY OF CARE A responsibility to ensure the safety of others.	**BREACH OF DUTY** Failing to meet the standard of a reasonable person or professional.
CAUSATION The breach directly led to the harm.	**DAMAGES** An actual loss occurred.

In both incidents, the first two elements were plainly present. Only the fourth — damages — was missing, and that was down to fortune.

What was missing, in both, was the fourth element. No one was hurt — the flash flood let us out, and the kayaking was a washout rather than a tragedy. But "no damages" is not the same as "no breach." It's the difference between a near miss and an incident, and that difference came down to fortune, not judgement. Leave the fourth box unticked by luck often enough, and eventually luck won't.

I'm not offering a legal verdict — whether a particular incident meets the threshold, and whether cover would respond, depends entirely on the specifics. But this is the territory you're standing in the moment you press on past your own documented limits. The risk assessment meant to protect you becomes the evidence that you knew, and continued anyway. And insurance written on the assumption that you'd operate within your stated procedures does not tend to look kindly on the discovery that you didn't.

The Want of a Nail

There's an old rhyme about how the want of a single nail loses a shoe, then a horse, then a rider, then a battle, then a kingdom — one small failure cascading into a catastrophic one. Incidents in the outdoors almost never come from a single large mistake. They come from a chain of small, un-made decisions, each one a nail left out.

Look again at the canyon. A provider cancels — a warning ignored. A concern is raised — and overridden. The team includes a staff member who had been to that canyon exactly once, on training. The coordinator overseeing the programme had never set foot in it at all. Not one of those, alone, was the disaster. But each was a point where someone could have said "this isn't right" and changed the course — and didn't. Line them up, and they lead somewhere no single one of them intended to go.

The value of naming the chain is that you don't have to wait for the last link. Any point along it is a place to stop.

A Plan You're Allowed to Change

None of this is an argument against planning. Quite the opposite. In a companion to this piece, *The Myth of Plan A*, I argued that a contingency plan isn't a nice-to-have — it's a professional obligation. But a Plan B that no one is authorised, or willing, to activate is just paper. Having the alternative and being allowed to reach for it are two entirely different things.

What you need is a structure firm enough to get you moving in the right direction, and flexible enough to leave room for judgement when reality doesn't cooperate. A grey structure, not a black-and-white one — because we are dealing with people, with weather, with a hundred variables that refuse to be linear. A script followed rigidly fails outdoors. So does having no plan at all. You need both: the plan to start from, and the permission to say, "the conditions have changed, so here's what we're doing instead."

That permission has to be built in advance, and it has to be real. Models exist to help. A hierarchical structure that genuinely empowers the person at the sharp end — closest to the hazard — to make decisions rather than merely request them. Or a risk-management approach such as the Bowtie method, which maps a hazard to the barriers that prevent it and the responses that contain it: *if conditions look like this, these are the actions we take*. What matters is that the format isn't just written down but rehearsed and enacted — so that when the water starts rising, the response isn't a phone call. It's already agreed.

And this is where I'd gently correct a distinction people sometimes draw. In an earlier piece, *We Kept Fixing The Wrong Thing*, I wrote about the danger of reacting too fast — firefighting symptoms instead of slowing down to find the cause. It might sound as though that contradicts everything here, which is about the danger of *not* acting. It doesn't. They're the same discipline. Slow down, but don't freeze. Don't react — respond. A reaction is instinctive and immediate; a response is what you get at the end of a short process where cognitive reasoning and emotional read come together to produce the best available outcome in the moment. It's only when we combine the two — the thinking and the feeling — that we genuinely raise our practice. Whether in a risk assessment or a facilitation, judgement is the point, and judgement draws on both.

Practical Takeaways

1. **Decide who can change the plan before the day begins.** Don't leave it to be worked out in the moment. Name the person with authority to adapt or stop the activity, and make sure everyone knows who that is.
2. **Empower the sharp end.** The person who can see the conditions, the water, and the group should be able to make the call — not just ask permission from someone who can't see any of it.
3. **Change the question that goes up the chain.** Replace "Should we continue?" with "Here's what we're changing to." Report a decision; don't request one.
4. **Treat warning signals as a chain, not isolated events.** Another provider pulling out, a flagged concern, an under-experienced team, an absent overseer — each is a link. You don't have to wait for the last one to break.
5. **Make the plan a grey structure.** Pre-agree "if conditions are X, we do Y," rehearse it, and give people explicit permission to use their judgement. A plan nobody is allowed to enact protects no one.

A risk assessment protects no one until someone is empowered to act on it — and the person watching the water rise should be the one allowed to change the plan.

Mike Thomas
Founder of Outside-In, a Hong Kong-based experiential education and development company. With over 25 years of experience across outdoor education, emotional intelligence coaching, and organisational development, he writes about practice, professionalism, and the conditions that help people and teams grow.

GET IN TOUCH
mike@outside-in.online
www.outside-in.online
+852 9709 9504