



Run With It, or Run Into It

What Buffalo Teach Us About Facing
Conflict, Hard Conversations, and Challenge.

By Carlos Acosta

My partner in our executive search practice – The ExeQfind Group, Warren Carter, recently shared an old maxim that originated from generations of ranchers on the plains of the American West. We were discussing a situation where questions surfaced as to how a short-listed candidate had managed conflict with his direct reports and the old adage provided some clarity into how his references spoke about the candidate's handling of the issue.



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I was inspired to share this in our blog to illustrate how it applies to all of us. The adage is derived from ranchers observations about how buffalo and cattle differ in their approach to facing a storm. It very much applies to each of us in our personal and professional lives.

The premise goes like this. When a storm rolls across open prairie, cattle instinctively do what feels safest in the moment. They turn and run from it. The problem is that storms on the American plains often move in the same direction the herd is fleeing. So, the cows run, the storm keeps pace, and the herd stays trapped inside the worst of the weather far longer than they need to be.



Buffalo on the other hand, do something different. When they sense a storm forming, they turn and move directly into it. Because the buffalo is moving toward the storm rather than away from it, the two close the distance quickly. The exposure is more intense, but it is over in a fraction of the time. The buffalo spends less total time in the storm than the cow does, precisely because it chose to meet it rather than outrun it.

It's a simple piece of natural behavior. It is also a fairly precise description of how most managers handle conflict, difficult conversations, and organizational pressure.



The Instinct to Run Is Rarely the Efficient Choice

Most of us were never taught to move toward friction. We were taught to manage it, delay it, or route around it. A difficult performance conversation gets pushed to “next quarter.” A conflict between two departments gets smoothed over rather than resolved. A hard call about underperformance gets deferred until it can no longer be avoided.

This isn’t a character flaw. It’s a rational-seeming response to short-term discomfort. But like the cattle running with the storm, the cost shows up later, and it compounds. The problem doesn’t disappear because it was avoided; it simply travels alongside the person avoiding it, for longer than it would have if addressed directly.

Managers who have spent real time in difficult roles tend to recognize this pattern quickly, often because they’ve lived it from both sides. The manager who avoids a hard conversation with a direct report isn’t sparing anyone pain. They’re extending it.

What “Moving Into It” Actually Looks Like

The buffalo analogy is often used as a motivational shorthand for, be bold, charge ahead, don’t shy away from hard things. That reading isn’t wrong, but it’s incomplete, and it can flatten a more useful idea into a slogan.

Moving into a storm isn’t about aggression or bravado. It’s about accurate assessment. The buffalo isn’t charging blindly; it is responding to a correct read of the situation; that the storm is coming regardless, and that the shortest path through it is the one that costs the least over time. Applied to leadership, this looks less like confrontation and more like clarity:

- Naming the real issue in a conversation instead of talking around it.
- Making a decision when the information available is sufficient, rather than waiting for certainty that may never arrive.

- Addressing a performance or culture problem at the first credible signal, not after it has become undeniable.
- Treating conflict between capable people as something to work through directly, rather than a risk to be managed from a distance.

None of this requires being combative. It requires being willing to shorten the exposure by engaging the challenge or pressure point early and directly.

Why This Matters More at the Leadership Level

The higher someone rises in an organization, the more consequential their instinct becomes, because their choices set the pattern for everyone reporting to them. A manager who consistently runs from difficulty teaches their team, implicitly, that avoidance is the acceptable response to pressure. A manager who moves toward it, calmly and with judgment, teaches something far more valuable; that hard things get shorter, not longer, when they are met head-on.

This is also, not incidentally, one of the qualities we at The QualiFind Group look for when assessing candidates for management and leadership roles. Technical competence is table stakes at senior levels. What differentiates candidates who go on to lead and manage well is far more often their relationship to friction: whether they have a track record of engaging directly with hard problems, or a track record of managing around them until someone else had to.

A Question Worth Sitting With

The next time a difficult conversation, a stalled decision, or an unresolved conflict is sitting on your desk, it's worth asking plainly: am I running with this storm, or am I moving through it?

The weather doesn't change based on which choice is made, only the length of time spent in it does.



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The QualiFind Group is a California-based talent acquisition firm focused on providing specialist to managerial recruitment to client organizations throughout the Americas. We offer a diverse team of recruiters based across Canada, the United States, Mexico, Chile, Peru and Brazil with experience supporting multinational organizations wherever they need talent.



About The ExeQfind Group

Our Atlanta-based executive search practice – The ExeQfind Group provides mid-management to executive leadership talent to organizations across the Americas and in 45 countries through our global alliance partners on 6 continents. The ExeQfind Group is comprised of accomplished executive search consultants located in Canada, the United States, Mexico, Chile, Peru and Brazil.



Forbes magazine has consistently ranked The ExeQfind Group among the **Top 200 Executive Search Firms in North America** and The QualiFind Group among the **Top 200 Professional Recruitment Firms in North America** for the past six consecutive years.