


The Buffalo Jump

 In a herd of buffalo, the alpha males – purportedly the smartest and wisest of the group – lead the way as the rest of the gang follows. This usually works out pretty well as they poke along chomping grass and doing whatever it is buffalo do.

But when there's a crisis, if something spooks them, they panic and stampede. Off they run in any direction that looks safe with the head buffaloes leading the way and the rest following snout-to-tail. Now if all goes well they eventually outrun whatever scared them and life on the prairie returns to normal.

But occasionally things go horribly wrong and the boss buffalo in his panic plunges over a cliff. . . and the rest of the troop follows. To their death. When the lead buffalo sees the precipice, there's no way to stop because *the momentum of the herd* behind pushes him forward off the edge. Then they all spill over the cliff – and buffaloes aren't built to bounce.

You could infer lots of lessons from this behavior but the big takeaway for me is that bit about the momentum of the herd. Apparently no buffalo speaks up and yells, "Hey, watch out, there's a big cliff ahead!" Of course it doesn't help that packed so close together their view is limited to the furry behind of the animal in front of them. But that's another topic...

Are you like a buffalo back somewhere in the herd, assuming all is well up front, daring not to open your mouth lest you upset the pace of the herd, or worse, irritate the pack's leaders?

It takes real courage to speak truth to power as the saying goes, doesn't it. It's risky (you could lose your job), you could be embarrassed, and of course you might be wrong. But clear thinking, predicated on the facts, coupled with the guts to speak up just might prevent a tragedy.

The lesson is: Don't be afraid to speak up! Many times I have 1-on-1 conversations with agency staffers brimming with insights, new ideas, and suggestions for smart effective solutions. . . but when I see them in a group problem-solving meeting they behave like silent buffaloes. Fear of saying something slightly controversial or looking stupid makes them hang back when a much worse outcome looms.

Ours is a business of *ideas* – that's where the value is, and where the future of any agency, and its individuals, lies. Ideas! Ideas other people haven't thought of. Or perhaps, *have* thought of – "Hey, a cliff!" – but are too timid to express.

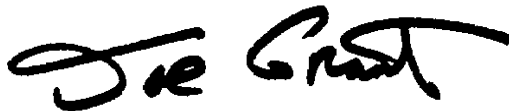
When you see a buffalo jump coming up, or if you spot another path with more opportunity, say something. After all, you've got a big stake in what happens: you might be next to vault over the edge.

And now a word to all the head buffaloes out there (who we know would never intentionally run the whole gang over a cliff, right?).

The best way to avoid a stampede is not to panic in the first place. And nothing helps prevent panic like planning, because you can think through scenarios as you calmly graze instead of running full tilt in a cloud of dust. You must make time to plan (at a minimum, a half-day offsite every quarter). Write the plan down – it won't be real unless it's on paper – with date-bound assignments and consequences to insure accountability. Sure, agencies occasionally get off a lucky shot from the hip but consistently successful ones infuse planning in their corporate DNA.

Finally, all you Head Buffaloes: make sure you establish and nurture an environment where any idea from anyone will be heard. . . long before you're forced into a stampede.

It just might save your hide.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joe Grant". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, sweeping initial "J".