

Leadership in Crisis Situations

The behaviours and mindsets of great crisis leaders

A crisis reveals the essence of our leaders: their judgement, personality, trustworthiness, integrity, empathy and compassion. A leader's failure to meet the demands of a crisis is quickly obvious and trust is lost.

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April 2020

The Covid-19 global crisis has placed leadership under the microscope.

Around the world a debate is raging about the quality of leadership – radio phone-in shows, TV debates, newspaper columns and blogs are all assessing our leaders, good and bad. Daily press conferences from political, scientific, business and military leaders allow us to compare good and poor leadership first-hand. We expect our employers to lead us through this crisis and will judge them by how their actions impacted us and our loved ones.

In April 2020, during the global Covid-19 crisis, a webinar attended by business people, leadership educators and academics considered the question: **“What are the skills and mindsets needed from leaders within a crisis?”** Our panel consisted of:

- General Sir Richard Shirreff (former NATO Deputy Supreme Commander and Co-Founder of Strategia Worldwide),
- Joanna Young, former senior leader in the London Metropolitan Police Service and now Chair of MetFriendly Society,
- Greg Reed, CEO of Homeserve UK
- Iain Pickard, Co-Founder of Strategia Worldwide.

This paper is a result of that discussion.

Why is a Crisis the Supreme Test for a Leader?

Crisis situations propel leaders into the unknown where very quickly they either rise to the challenges or reveal weaknesses. By their nature, crises raise the unexpected and generate uncertainty and fear in everyone involved. The technical expertise and management success which may have steered many leaders into senior roles are almost

certain not to be the keys to success in a crisis – ‘necessary but not sufficient’.

A crisis reveals the essence of our leaders: their judgement, personality, trustworthiness, integrity, empathy and compassion. A leader’s failure to meet the demands of a crisis is quickly obvious and trust is lost. Do people trust and follow the guidance they are given? Do they follow their lead? Or are they non-compliant, challenging and doubtful? Successful leaders generate a feeling of community and common purpose. Under poor leaders, consensus quickly fragments, people follow their own direction and organisation disintegrates.

“What leaders need during a crisis is not a predefined response plan but behaviours and mindsets that will prevent them from overreacting to yesterday’s developments and help them look ahead.” Gemma D’Auria and Aaron De Smet

Courage and Resilience

Courage in the face of uncertainty defines the best leaders – those who recognise the uncertainty they face but realise their role is still to provide guidance, assurance and decisions to their people. This courage requires personal resilience and strength, an ability to face the unknown and believe in one’s capacity to solve critical problems. Coping with setbacks, challenges from others and tactical defeats distinguishes the most successful leaders in a crisis.

Collaboration

Historically the great leader is often seen as an isolated figure, leading from the top through force of personality and insight. In today's complex world, crisis leadership requires collaboration with a team of like-minded people who trust the leader and have the leader's trust. The leader provides them with guidance and direction but also allows them the freedom to make decisions and to act.

Leaders who expect to approve all decisions and solutions become a bottleneck, delaying swift progress. In 1990 during Perrier's contamination crisis in the US and Europe, HQ demanded to approve all communications and decisions. As a result, Perrier never got ahead of the crisis or the news-cycle.

Collaboration also requires the leader to navigate disagreements, different personalities, stresses, motivations and values among the top team. In "You're It", Marcus et al explain that crisis leaders "coordinate a wide cast of characters into cohesive effort" which requires "understanding motives, finding common themes, building organisation and communication".

Communication and Listening

Communication is perhaps the most visible area of focus for a leader during a crisis. Clear and consistent messages regularly communicated inspire trust and provide assurance. But the leader should not mistake this for providing all solutions. Vulnerable communication from a leader who is not afraid to admit that they do not have all the information today but has a credible plan will gain trust more than the leader who feels he/she needs to provide answers today, only for them to be proved incorrect tomorrow.

Effective communication also depends on listening. Listening to specialist advisers, colleagues and fellow leaders and to those at the sharp end of the crisis, the troops on the ground or the agents in the call centre is essential. Understanding their insights, questions and concerns will help invest the leader's message with a reality that people can recognise and trust.

Care, for others and self

In a crisis people notice the leader who genuinely cares. During the Covid-19 crisis, those leaders and businesses who were visibly focused on the bottom-line and bail-outs have been dismissed quickly. HomeServe won trust and plaudits by promising their staff not to use the government furlough scheme or make redundancies. They pivoted to support employees helping Health Care workers and vulnerable customers. These organisations win the trust of employees and customers because they understand their concerns and priorities.

In order to care for others, crisis leaders need to remember to care for themselves. Tired leaders make poor decisions and need to know when to step back to hand over to others. In the midst of the Apollo 13 crisis, Flight Director Gerald Griffin knew he should finish his shift and hand over to Gene Krantz and his team as fatigue set in.

Campaign leadership

A military-style campaign plan is more strategic and comprehensive than the operational recovery plan that most businesses use in a crisis. Business recovery plans are important and usually identify the major risks and operational issues which need to be addressed to

help the leadership team stabilise business during the initial moments of crisis.

A campaign plan is broader and more integrated and ensures the leadership team considers desired end-states and objectives as well as relevant stakeholders, people and operations. A campaign plan allows the leadership team to track progress daily and adapt to changing circumstances while keeping focused on their end objectives.

Campaign plans help leaders deal with cost-benefit trade-offs and the dilemmas and competing pressures that inevitably emerge. They anticipate scenarios and the responses of others, helping leaders

to keep several moves ahead of events to avoid getting caught in a cycle of reaction.

Developing Leaders for Crisis Situations

Great crisis leaders are developed before crisis situations strike. Very few emerge unexpectedly during a crisis.

Development of great crisis leaders is a continuous process, driven by their own leaders through coaching, mentoring, planning and 'war-gaming'. Leaders who continuously challenge, question and stretch their teams will be developing the judgement, agility, inquiring mind and ability to respond to the unexpected which are essential in crisis leadership.

References and Further Reading

Crisis Communications: The Definitive Guide to Managing the Message, *Fink, S. 2013*

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You're It: Crisis, Change, and How to Lead When It Matters Most *Marcus, L., McNulty, E., Henderson, J. and Dorn, B. 2019*

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