

EVERY LEADER A CRISIS LEADER? PREPARE TO LEAD WHEN IT MATTERS MOST

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For more than 15 years, through our work in the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative at Harvard University, we have observed, interviewed, and analyzed people who lead in high-stakes, high-pressure situations: natural disasters, terror attacks, industrial accidents, and more. Our field research is somewhat unorthodox: It is typically former executive education students, now in top leadership positions, who invite us to shadow them during events or to interview them shortly thereafter. While this introduces potential selection, social desirability, and other biases into our work, the existing, trust-based relationship enables access that would otherwise be impossible. We have done our best to mitigate such

bias by using more than one observer/interviewer with each individual whenever possible and focusing on meta-themes that emerge from multiple individuals across a variety of incidents.

When we began, shortly after the 9/11 attacks, these people seemed a rare breed. Few people outside public safety and the military prepared to lead in circumstances where lives would be on the line. Most executives were trained in strategy and tactics that were best suited for relatively stable conditions.

This picture changed with more frequent severe weather calamities, active shooter incidents, ethical missteps, and market upheavals. Leading effectively through

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these sorts of events has become a required competency for more and more executives. Even when the crisis is thrust upon an organization, such as in a natural disaster, the ability of leaders to respond skillfully can prevent a second or third crisis from erupting.

At any moment, any executive could be thrust into a crisis scenario. Their leadership skills, emotional balance, and intelligence will be tested under the harshest conditions. Chronicling these events through our research, we have found that every leader can benefit from being better prepared for adversity. Even recognizing the potential for crisis orients executives to mitigate hazardous scenarios, preparing them to lead when it matters most.

Is Crisis Leadership Different?

Our initial hypothesis was that leading through crises requires a distinct set of skills. However, as we observed leaders over time—before, during, and following a crisis—we discovered that this assumption did not tell the full story.

As we developed our meta-leadership framework (see sidebar) and practice method through research and work with leaders in the field, we came to understand that the fundamental building blocks of effective every day and crisis leadership are quite similar: High emotional intelligence, a compelling vision and strategy, and decision-making acuity are just three examples. The key to performing well in both routine and crisis situations was learning how

to deploy those skill in a pivot from initial panic into productive action—and then to move others swiftly and synchronously to address the challenges they face.

META-LEADERSHIP

The meta-leadership model has been developed by faculty at the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative (NPLI) after extensive research on and observation of leaders in high-stress, high-stakes situations. Meta-leadership reframes the process and practice of leaders with a comprehensive organizing framework for understanding and integrating the many facets of leadership, a method for catalyzing high performance, and tools for improving coordination and collaboration within and across organizational boundaries. The dimensions of meta-leadership are the person (who you are), the situation (the context in which you lead), and connectivity (the network of people, entities, and assets you link and leverage to create a positive outcome).

In a survey of 374 alumni of one of our executive education programs, we explored leader behavior in crisis response. We received responses from 198. The survey specified behaviors in a setting with a formalized approach to crisis management, such as the Incident Command System (ICS), to control some variability in management style and structure and enable more precise analysis of leader behaviors on team performance. ICS emerged from wildfire fighting, a scenario requiring rapid integration of personnel from a variety of organizations into a highly functional team. ICS provides a standard management structure with clearly delineated roles, responsibilities, and processes. The incident commander is the designated formal leader, and there are designated formal subordinate leaders of five specific functions, such as logistics. Professionals trained and certified in ICS competencies are expected to step into an emergency operation and to be immediately productive, even if they are not familiar with those working alongside them. ICS and its variants have become a standard operating model for crisis response. Our hypothesis was that positive behaviors, by designated leaders, could improve team performance and that negative behaviors could degrade team performance.

We based the positive and negative behavior indices for the survey on the results of “great leader–lousy leader” exercises we have conducted in hundreds of symposia around the world. Recipients of the survey may have participated in this exercise during their educational program though we did not control for that variable. In the symposia, participants were asked to identify traits and behaviors of both a great and lousy leader they had known (thus historical figures are excluded). This exercise reveals the impact of a leader on an individual follower. In designing the survey on leader impact on team performance, we extrapolated the most common results from the symposia exercise and synthesized them into lists of 11 positive and 11 negative behaviors. The respondents indicated that they had seen the good, the bad, and the ugly—and, confirming our hypothesis, they indicated positive leader behaviors stimulated higher team performance and negative behaviors were detrimental to the team.

The most commonly cited negative behaviors in the survey results were failure to communicate clearly, ego-driven behavior, and obsession with details (i.e., micromanagement). The top positive behaviors were in remaining calm and confident, adapting strategy and tactics appropriately to changing circumstances, and clear and accurate communication.

The positive behaviors could sit quite naturally in a competency map at a wide range of organizations. Which company would not want executives to behave this way each and every day? The negative behaviors are ones that many organizations actively work to uproot. Thus, knowing what should and should not happen is quite elementary. Getting there, however, is a more significant challenge.

Rather than different skills, effective crisis leaders excel because of their proficiency deploying the positive behaviors, and their facility avoiding the negative behaviors, under trying circumstances. Imagine two golfers: one an elite professional and the other a weekend duffer. They play by the same general rules, use variations on the same equipment, and at times even play the same courses. The differences between them become evident as the pro plays the game at a

much higher level than the casual golfer. A 12-foot putt causes the duffer to sweat; the pro makes it calmly, all while surrounded by a throng of fans, television cameras zooming in, and a large financial reward at stake.

Does this analogy take us back to the “leaders are born, not made” debate? We think not. Behaviors, by definition, are learned. The behaviors on our “good” list, however, are often recognized and rewarded less than hard metrics of revenue, cost, or production volume. Accepting bad behavior, even from people who perform well on financial measures, will result in a toxic culture where performance is difficult to sustain. This should be an additive exercise: positive behavior *and* superior results, not a trade-off between the two.

Three Ways Great Crisis Leaders Are Different

Our research took us up close with officials and executives leading during responses from Hurricane Katrina through the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Boston Marathon bombing response, the triple hurricanes of 2017, and more. We recognized that those who led most effectively during crises had mastered three aspects of leadership. More important, these areas are increasingly relevant to everyday circumstances. Thus, rather than thinking of stepping up from leadership to crisis leadership, the preferred path may be to help leaders develop comfort with crises as a way to improve their performance in more routine contexts. The two sides of this spectrum actually reinforce one another. So, the better one is every day, the better will one will be in a crisis, and vice versa.

The first thing we noticed is that strong crisis leaders are tenacious in building robust teams—and put the team’s success ahead of their own. This runs counter to the common conception of the heroic crisis leader as commander. In a true crisis, a potentially overwhelming “to do” list suddenly confronts a leader. There are people to be saved, support to bring into the operation,

media to address, resources to be secured, and expertise to be recruited. There are many essential jobs to be done, and the leader needs highly competent, proactive people to take them on.

We first met Admiral (ret.) Thad Allen when he took over the federal response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. We were with him again when he was National Incident Commander during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010. Allen described recruiting a team of “dogs that hunt,” by which he meant capable individuals willing to make decisions and take actions to solve problems. On several occasions, we interviewed Harriet Green, a CEO working in turnaround situations where the company’s viability was in serious doubt. She told us of asking staff for help as a route to finding hidden talent in otherwise troubled organizations. Both leaders actively sought out people as strong, or even stronger, than themselves.

In routine circumstances, many organizations tolerate second- or third-tier performers who, ultimately, are a drag on the larger organization. Those with a crisis leadership mind-set are less tolerant. They know the risk inherent in weak links. Instead, they seek and develop top talent throughout the enterprise in order to mitigate potential crises as well as build response capabilities. They shape “leaderful” organizations, stocked with people they can count on when time matters most.

The second element of successfully leading through crisis is the focus on order beyond control. Crises are chaotic. Information is incomplete, constantly changing, and sometimes contradictory. There are numerous, often divergent, stakeholders. Ambiguity is rife. To deal with this, the most effective crisis leaders view the situation as a complex adaptive system in which no one knows everything, and no one controls everything. Instead of obsessing over control, they seek to establish order. That is, they want as many players as possible to know what is expected of them and what they can expect of others. Attempts to control breed friction. By contrast, fostering order creates an environment in which great autonomy of action is possible under the umbrella of a unified mission.

Framing of the problem and development of a solution broadly—what we call *meta-leadership*—pays dividends in the turbulent day-to-day business environment in which many organizations now find themselves. Thinking like crisis leaders, beyond purely linear solutions such as reorganization, executives can focus on creating the conditions in which the desired outcome is most likely to emerge. This mind-set might seem foreign to those accustomed to thinking of leading as directing a top-down organization. It requires a good deal of confidence: seeking control only of what one can control and, for the rest, exerting influence, sometimes well beyond one’s authority.

The third proficiency of effective crisis leaders is asking great questions. Perhaps because so much is unknown in an unfolding crisis, those who do best are relentlessly curious. They encourage staff to surface anomalies that challenge assumptions. They welcome the perspectives of stakeholders who see things differently than they do. They are not intimidated by uncertainty. By encouraging an environment in which everyone is asking, “What are we missing?” and “Have we considered ...,” they surface more facets of the problem as well as potential pathways to solving it.

We spent time with Desi Matel-Anderson during the response to super storm Sandy. She served as the chief innovation advisor at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Traditionally during a disaster, emergency managers limit their interactions to like-minded professionals and formally sanctioned entities, such as first responder agencies. During the Sandy response, she asked, “Why can’t formal and informal response networks work together?” She expanded her team to incorporate self-deployed volunteers—technologists, designers, and more—who worked intentionally to connect community groups and FEMA. These volunteer tech experts, designers, and others brought vast information into FEMA that they would otherwise have missed while they pushed information to the community that those people otherwise would not know. The Field Innovation Team turned into an invaluable resource, bridging formal and informal systems to fill gaps and unearth fresh potential the midst of the crisis.

The focus on problem solving and the openness to create coalitions of the willing are practices useful in any organization. These orient one's systems toward nimbleness and adaptability to rapidly evolving circumstances. Many organizations are rife with rigid silos and territorial behavior. The curiosity of the crisis leader, as exemplified by Matel-Anderson, demonstrates that silos can be connected without being destroyed. It is a matter of getting everyone to ask of each other, "How can I help make you a success?"

The Implications for Leader Selection and Development

Leadership development is often a process for developing managers for routine circumstances. In our experience, crisis management is restricted to an operational, midlevel, business continuity function focused on tactics and logistics. Meanwhile, senior executives assume that with those capabilities in place, they will be ready to lead in the face of adversity. What we have seen suggests that these are two fundamental mistakes.

Crisis management is a specialized function that deserves respect and support. Deploying resources, liaising with first response agencies, and preserving critical organizational functions are all important. Crisis leadership, however, involves the human elements. The only evidence of leadership is that people are following you. Thus, crisis leaders ensure that they and their associates are grounded cognitively, psychologically, and emotionally amidst great uncertainty. That is, despite apparent chaos, they are thinking clearly, behaving appropriately, and moderating physical and mental stress in themselves and others. These leaders embrace complexity and thrive on ambiguity. They foster connectivity across diverse networks to create unity of effort toward a mutual goal.

If those factors sound like markers of the contemporary business environment, they are. The most compelling reason to encourage intentional crisis leadership training and exposure is because it tests and teaches individuals to learn and find opportunity in even the

most difficult situations. Those crucible experiences, and believing in yourself that you can overcome them, fosters the strength and confidence necessary to succeed in today's fast-paced and turbulent environment. That high-performing team you have in place every day is your most important asset for navigating a vexing crisis.

In a 2018 study, the World Economic Forum found that the two largest obstacles to change were "insufficient understanding of disruptive changes" and "resource constraints." Leaders can learn what it takes and develop the capacities to meet those very challenges. To succeed in a crisis environment, one learns to adapt to the unexpected. To paraphrase an old maxim: Make what you need from what you have.

What can organizations do to harvest this potential? One step is to link those who expect to lead in crisis with those who are charged with managing one. In drills and exercises run by crisis managers, the role of chief executive officer (CEO) is often played by a junior staffer wearing a "CEO" placard and reacting in prescribed ways. Senior executives benefit enormously by experiencing the "battle rhythm" of a simulated crisis response. They better understand the complexities they will confront in the "you're it" environment of an actual crisis. They see the consequences of their positive and negative behaviors on team performance. More important, they experience their strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of the organization, in situations where it matters most. One doesn't want a potentially career ending crisis to be one's first time at the wheel. Confidence—and humility—borne of experience are valuable assets.

With senior executive participating in exercises and drills, crisis managers, in turn, learn to better anticipate the questions and behavior they can expect to encounter from those higher in the hierarchy. They sharpen their ability to lead up in ways that foster better decisions and more timely actions. These interactions contribute to vertical connectivity that improves everyday operations.

A second benefit is that the exercises prompt line managers to better grasp the larger, existential risks facing the organization. We ask participants in crisis

trainings what keeps them awake at night. Once different people, at different levels and in different departments exchange their concerns, there emerges a rich, nuanced mosaic of both threats and opportunities. We have seen dangers unearthed that never occurred to risk professionals just as those professionals introduce hazards not conceived by those occupied with running the day-to-day business. Everyone involved gets a deeper understanding of the business.

Conclusion

In today's turbulent environment, executives are more likely than ever to face a crisis. Rather than viewing this as a threat, organizations can seize the opportunity to hone both critical everyday capabilities while building the capacity to become resilient during crisis and change.

This piece is adapted from the book, *You're It: Crisis, Change, and How to Lead When it Matters Most* (PublicAffairs, 2019)



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