

Helping Leaders Adapt When Serious Shift Hits the Plan

By Susan J. Mecca



Crisis are frightening and common occurrences in our personal and professional lives. Our best strategies or plans disappear overnight, shoved aside by a life-threatening diagnosis, a natural disaster, a PR nightmare, or a core product recall. Especially during the initial stages of a crisis, where urgency and high stakes can intersect with ambiguity and uncertainty, the spotlight on a leader's performance can seem harsh and unyielding.

We've all seen examples of men and women who have led a company, an organization, even a country through a crisis in admirable ways. Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, is a current example of someone who shows up—regardless of the situation—with a measured response, a spirit of collaboration, and even humor. There are also far too many examples where leadership in a crisis has ranged from awkward or ill-advised to self-serving or even unethical.

Perhaps one of the most recent examples of a failure of leadership during an organizational crisis is Equifax. The company waited six weeks after becoming aware that 143 million of their customers had their sensitive data hacked, allowing three of their executives to sell shares of Equifax stock before the breach was announced. Equifax communications were ambiguous and their remedies self-protective—initially charging customers to freeze their data or requiring them to promise not to sue the company in exchange for free credit monitoring. While Rick Smith (CEO of Equifax at the time of the breach) made a promising speech, stating that “Equifax will not be defined by this incident but rather how we respond,” the actual follow-up has been uninspiring.

Anyone who studies leadership in a crisis will find many suggestions about what leaders can do to effectively lead during times of crisis: Be prepared; lead decisively; commu-

CRISIS NAVIGATION

Centered —Overcome the biological and evolutionary imperatives to protect oneself first when an environment seems psychologically or physically threatening; using self-calming techniques to take thoughtful, non-reactive actions even under times of extreme stress.
Resources —Gather the data and surround oneself with individuals who will supplement, advise, and assist in making effective decisions in a timely manner or provide emotional, physical, or spiritual support.
Information —Gather relevant data to optimize problem solving. Make careful decisions about what information is shared and with whom.
Strategic —Thoughtfully and deliberately utilize one's strengths and work around one's weaknesses; recognizing personal limitations.
Intuition —Listen to one's gut or instinctive reasoning, sometimes despite common consensus.
Self-care —Put on one's "oxygen mask" to foster the energy and resilience that will be required to navigate through the current circumstances.

nicate; be transparent; apologize; stay flexible; get the best information you can. While these concepts are helpful in the abstract, my experiences as an HR professional, psychologist, and executive coach working with leaders for over 30 years would suggest that these recommendations fall short. The leaders I have seen navigate effectively through organizational or personal crises do so thoughtfully and intentionally, rather than reactively. They demonstrate an effective and strategic use of themselves, calling upon their core values, personal wisdom, strengths, and resources while maintaining their resilience and balance.

While all of these factors are critical, I believe that consciously operating from a core set of values lies at the center of effective crisis navigation. In times when control is wrested away and a clear path is not yet obvious, values can provide a foundation for the actions to be taken. What does leading from a deep set of core values look like when a crisis occurs?

Many of us remember the 1982 Tylenol poisoning crisis in which seven people died from consuming cyanide-injected Tylenol capsules. James Burke, the chairman of Johnson & Johnson (makers of Tylenol) gathered his key people together to collect input for dealing with this potential organizational disaster. At the absolute top of their agenda was this question from Burke, "How do we protect the people?" Secondary was the question, "What would happen to the product?" Johnson & Johnson swiftly withdrew all Tylenol from the shelves at a company cost of millions of dollars, began a communication process that was open and transparent, and provided the affected families financial assistance and counseling—even though they were not responsible for the poisoning. Burke's leadership through the crisis was based on his values and the values of Johnson & Johnson—transparency, openness, and putting public safety first.¹

Great leaders know who they are, at their core. They are not inflexible about their leadership but they have, regardless of the circumstances, an inner compass that guides them. They are intentional in their leadership—not reactive. When leaders in crisis believe that they can choose their behaviors—regardless of the situation—plus have a core guidance system of intensely held values, they have something that anchors them when everything else seems out of control. Equally important, the actions of those leaders send a clear message to their teams and their employees the behaviors that are expected of them as well.

With intentionality as the foundation for action during a crisis, the other factors (personal wisdom, strengths, resili-

ence, resources, and balance) suggest some ways leaders can bring their best performance to difficult situations. To make these ideas easier to remember, I've used the acronym CRISIS (See table above).

Get Centered

Humans are biologically and evolutionarily wired to react to any situation that feels dangerous—physically or psychologically. While we logically know that the loss of a key customer is not life-threatening, the amygdala (the oldest part of the brain, often called the "lizard brain," which deals with these situations at a very primitive level) is less proficient at discerning between a potential business disaster and a physical threat. If the amygdala codes an event as perilous in some way, the threat reaction system will go into instinctive action—sending adrenaline coursing through the physical bodies and initiating the fight, flight, flee, or faint reaction.

When the amygdala is in charge, the neo-cortex (the thinking part of the brain) is unceremoniously shoved to the back, leaving the pathway open for a defensive, perhaps even self-protective reaction rather than a response that is strategic, thoughtful, or authentic. For example, the CEO of United Airlines, David Munoz, recently demonstrated an unfortunate response when a passenger was forcibly removed from a United Airlines plane. While the official United response was apologetic to their public and to David Dao (the customer in question), an internal letter from Munoz—quickly leaked to the public—blamed Dao, labeling him "disruptive and belligerent."

Leaders are responsible for their wake—their words and actions (conscious or unconscious, intentional or amygdala-driven) send waves throughout an organization—especially in a crisis when employees are looking for direction. While Munoz' desire might have been to show solidarity with his employees, his internal letter appeared to the public as a clear attempt to shift blame onto the passenger. The ripples of his reaction, along with United's first tone-deaf response on social media, have cost United money, customers, and public approval.² It also raises the question of the impact his blaming behavior had or will have on the customer-facing part of United Airlines. Will Munoz' letter be taken by some as permission to adopt an adversarial approach to future customer concerns? Time will tell.

How can a leader get centered when everything is swirling around him/her? How can one send the message to the team

in a way that demonstrates that a quick reaction is less valuable/helpful than thoughtful, measured response?

A simple measure involves closing the office door for five minutes and initiating slow, deep breathing to quiet the amygdala. Carefully considering the values to be reflected in the response, as well as recognizing a tendency to blame or attack, as a nonproductive action is a helpful way from a reactive to a strategic response. During high-stress times, finding a way to create some space between “stimulus” and “response” is critical. For example, helping the conversation move beyond immediate (and likely amygdala-driven responses) by asking questions about how we want to show up to the public, to our customers, and to our employees as we craft a response or strategy and/or encouraging a break or time to reflect on the response. Even well-placed humor can break the cycle of fear-based reactions driven by our evolutionary defense system.

Get Resources

Effectively gathering and utilizing resources including expertise, knowledge, energy, money, and time creates a significant advantage for organizations, especially during trying times. Research demonstrates that, in multiple arenas, people who effectively leverage resources during times of crisis typically have better outcomes than the lone rangers or those who are afraid to ask for help, for fear of appearing weak. Having a personal community of support is critical in during a crisis.

There is an important caveat about using resources during a crisis. While it may be easy or feel comforting to round up the usual people, a crisis often requires a different level or order of thinking to arrive at potential solutions. While this is obvious in a medical crisis (where few of us are experts in the diagnosis we are facing), it is equally true with an organizational or personal crisis.

When pulling together your own personal crisis team, look not only for those who have provided clear thinking and solid wisdom in the past but also those who will ask hard questions and bring relevant expertise. To support the “how” of crisis leadership, a leader should include: people who will support the intentions that guide him, who will bring their best selves to the situation, and who have the skills and abilities that will augment his own. After all, remember the definition of a crisis—a situation that forces the individual to operate out of her usual comfort level and requires skills and tools she does not necessarily have. A leader should not expect to be able to solve this alone.

Get Information

The brain craves certainty, particularly during a crisis. Uncertainty triggers the amygdala’s alert system³ (explaining why the time between the discovery of a crisis and the implementation of a solution is often the most stressful). I believe that is why the drive to find information is so strong immediately after a crisis has occurred. Plus, as smart, competent people, we want to have all the facts, consider all the possible outcomes, be prepared for what all of what might come—especially in a crisis when our sense of control has been shattered.

While information is readily available in these days of the Internet, there are a couple of cautions worth mentioning when seeking information in a crisis. First, have a strategy for

navigating the information gathering process—stick to well-researched websites, respected thought leaders, and verify the data found, regardless of the source or how it aligns with personal biases. Blindly wandering around the Internet hoping for actionable ideas or looking to confirm opinions is likely to create an overload of unreliable information or discouraging examples of similar situations gone awry.

Second, track the mood impact that the information search is. One of my clients, anxious to find better outcomes for her husband’s cancer than the one his oncologists were suggesting, used her strong research skills to ferret out internet stories about radical remissions and experimental treatments. Unfortunately, she found significantly fewer positive outcomes than she had hoped, further fueling her desperation. Once she realized the emotional impact her searches were having on her mood, she significantly decreased her internet research.

Finally, handling information effectively during a crisis is as much as about the dissemination of information as it is about the gathering. Be equally intentional about how and when information is being shared. While transparency as a leader is

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critical, too much of a look “behind the curtain” is not helpful either. I remember a leader who once sent a companywide email outlining a medical diagnosis that he had received. While his willingness to be vulnerable with his organization was admirable, the diagnosis was neither life threatening nor particularly relevant to most the organization. For most employees, his disclosure was just a case of too much information.

Get Strategic

A few years ago, I began the process of interviewing senior business leaders who had experienced cancer. Leaders from business, government, nonprofits, and the judiciary generously met with me to talk about their experiences with cancer and to reflect on the wisdom they learned on their journey. As I began to look back over my notes, one of the themes that emerged was the deftness with which they made use of their natural strengths as leaders. The capabilities they brought to their cancer fight were, in a large part, the competencies that had made them successful leaders—focus, discipline, delegation, communication, and other important leadership skills. It was as if, in the moments following their diagnosis, they instinctively knew the assets within them they could rely on in this medical crisis.

While knowing and leveraging personal strengths in a crisis is crucial, so is understanding one’s weaknesses. As anyone who has done personal growth work knows, it is under stress that we

are most likely to slip backwards into our least effective (and least attractive) personality traits. At the outset of the crisis, self-reflection (and advice from trusted advisors) can be helpful about: What do I need to watch out for as we/I go through this tough time? How might I get in my own way? Add in some accountability by regularly asking for feedback or a heads-up should those old habits arise. Not only will this exercise help navigate this crisis more consciously and effectively, it is likely to serve as a potent bit of role-modeling for a leader's team.

Get Intuitive

Steve Jobs called intuition “more powerful than intellect.” Tom Peters said, “The crazier the times are, the more important it is for leaders to develop and to trust their intuition.” It is a topic that many in business shy away from, preferring to rely solely on logic and facts to make critical decisions. Research on decision-making has found that there are circumstances when intuition is more valuable. Intuition is not particularly useful in decision-making where the data is well understood and options can be calculated or in making decisions with a long track record of experience behind them (and for which circumstances have not changed).

However, researchers have also found that intuition can be extremely important in a rapidly changing environment, such as in a crisis. In those circumstances, instinct or intuition can be critical, particularly when used in connection with analytical thinking. In those situations, people who combine both typically make the best decisions.

In a crisis, out of our comfort zones, and surrounded by well-meaning people with opinions about the best way to proceed, it is possible to lose track of one's wisdom and gut instinct. Don't let the wisdom of the crowd override intuition, especially if it has been useful and spot-on in the past. By taking some time away from the fray, doing some journaling, and paying attention to hunches and dreams can surface important guidance or information.

Get Self-care

Under the best circumstances, many leaders struggle with the concept of self-care. In a crisis, the concept of self-care can seem counterintuitive. Swirling from logistics, potentially disastrous outcomes, impossible decisions, and fueled by sense of urgency that a crisis perpetuates in our lives, finding time for self-care can feel impossible or unnecessary. In fact, we can become engaged in the crisis to the point of superstition—afraid a single moment of distraction might result in a preventable disaster. Medical staff in high-stress situations often experience the same dilemma. A pediatric oncologist once shared how wrenching the decision was to go home to his family when one of his young patients was struggling. A deeply caring man, he felt like he was abandoning both the patient and the family during their most critical time. Yet, failing to attend to his own needs and that of his family ultimately led to exhaustion, divorce, and estrangement from his son.

There is a reason that flight attendants remind parents, and those traveling with people who need assistance, to first put on their own oxygen masks should cabin pressure drop. If the caretaker has passed out from a lack of oxygen, they

can't render care to the person in need. As leaders, this is a particularly crucial lesson. Taking the time to put on one's oxygen mask is not a selfish act but rather a pre-emptive move to ensure ongoing effective leadership. Failure to do so can put a leader into the danger zone where exhaustion leads to poor decision making or disastrous off the cuff comments.

What does putting on one's oxygen mask look like? James Loehr and Tony Schwartz in their book *The Power of Full Engagement* outline the importance of considering multiple areas where energy must be maintained—the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual—to be at the top of one's game as a leader. Simple steps that will yield great dividends include eating healthily, avoiding excessive alcohol, getting enough sleep, taking multiple breaks during the day, breathing deeply, exercising, connecting with any form of spirituality that is particularly meaningful or supportive, and talking to friends.

One of the young leaders I worked with led his organization through multiple years of minimal profits and disappointing losses. Throughout that time, he and his team have remained resilient, self-reflective, and open to learning while challenging themselves and their processes. As a result their customers, who are large companies, have remained loyal and employee turnover exceptionally low. To maintain his own resilience, he exercises faithfully, eats a very careful diet, takes time away with his family, and connects with close friends and mentors on a regular basis.

Conclusion

For many leaders, crises and the inherent challenges that come with them can be a career proving ground. While the ability to create a sound business plan and execute business strategies are a day-to-day requirement, for many of the leaders, it is during times of crisis that their leadership will be under the closest scrutiny. Crises can be a time of tremendous growth for the leader, the team, and the organization. By staying present and intentional, bringing together the appropriate people and information, using our own skills strategically, listening to our inner wisdom, and taking the time to maintain our resilience, leaders (and their teams or organizations) can navigate through disruptive times with skill and success. ■■

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