



Leading out of a crisis

Dominic Cockram discusses what in his opinion defines a good crisis leader and considers how changes in society are impacting on the skills needed to tackle an incident

How do leadership qualities in the normal business environment differ from those required in a crisis situation?

We have to go back a step to answer this question. In many ways, the real question is how does a crisis differ from normal business?

The key characteristics of a crisis are: surprise; major disruption to the normal flow of activity; a lack of information; loss of control; high levels of stress; intense external scrutiny; a focus on the short-term; and immense time pressure. In a crisis there is real pressure to make decisions rapidly, often based on incomplete information.

Furthermore, staff are often dealing with unfamiliar situations (although sometimes based within their normal business environment) and individuals fear making mistakes and/or being the cause of major impacts or possibly loss of life. In terms of the crisis team, members often do not know one another very well, having been brought together at very short notice, and leaders may be selected from a rota or may simply be the person available at the time.

Given this very different operating environment, the behaviours of those in response teams and those leading the response have to be different from 'business as usual'. The key areas that change are:

- The requirement for rapid decision-making based often on insufficient or incomplete information;
- The requirement to manage information from many different sources, and to create a coherent and informative picture of what is 'fact and reality' and what is supposition or assumption. The ability to separate fact from fiction in what is often a confused and chaotic environment;
- The leader needs to create stability from chaos to allow effective command and control of the situation;
- The leader's behaviour may need to change from the normal business approach to being much more decisive and cutting through the 'clutter' to reach the critical issues and facts;

- Time is always an issue in crisis response. Leaders need to be able to both develop a clear view of criticality and timelines to know where they must focus their decisions and the immediate efforts of their teams, and to determine what can be deferred;
- The leader must think strategically – he/she is there to provide the overview and to look to the future – the tactical level (silver) staff are there to manage the operational delivery through the continuity teams and the leader must be able to avoid being dragged down into the 'detail', instead providing the critical strategic direction and vision.

Thus overall, a crisis leader must be confident, decisive, a strategic thinker, able to communicate effectively, and recognise what is important when potentially surrounded by confusion and chaos.

What do you see as the main attributes of an effective crisis leader? How would you prioritise these abilities?

There is no unique formula for describing the 'right combination' of qualities that go to make a leader. Leadership is essentially creative – it is the leader who determines the objective, sets the direction and provides the drive, motivation and energy to attain it.

However, in a crisis, there are certain core qualities that a crisis leader does require as a minimum to be 'good':

- **Decisive** – to be decisive at the right time and brave enough not to make a decision if it is the wrong time;
- **Listener** – to be able to listen to advice and use it wisely;
- **Communicator** – to be able to communicate effectively with staff internally so they have clear direction, and with stakeholders externally so they understand what is happening;
- **Self confidence** – to be able to make difficult or unpopular decisions and stand apart if it is required;
- **Strategic** – to have the vision to know

what is critical in time and activities, and to have the ability to look for what may be round the corner;

- **Respect** – to gain the trust and respect of your team and those around you;
- **Judgement** – to be able to assimilate information, identify what is important and make a measured decision; and
- **Delegation** – to be able to distribute work effectively and not be dragged into the detail (unless absolutely necessary).

To prioritise, the three key capabilities in my book would be:

1. Strategic vision
2. Timely decision-making
3. Ability to communicate

Are the skills which we expect from a leader in a crisis those which can be learned or are they innate qualities within the individual?

There are those leaders that are born and those that are made – but the greatest leaders are those that combine the two. Whichever it may be, there is no doubt that everyone can vastly increase their powers of leadership through training and rehearsal.

In crisis leadership, some find it easy and are natural performers in a crisis; others need to practise, but everyone can get better. We all learn and I doubt you would find anyone who has had to respond to a crisis who can say they got it absolutely right.

To what extent have the characteristics which define a good crisis leader changed in response to the changing dynamics of the society in which we operate?

I will focus on two of the most apparent dynamics that have changed – the power of media scrutiny, with 24 hour news, and the speed of modern communications channels.

These factors have definitely changed the entire dynamic of crisis response – a good response will not necessarily rescue you unless your ability to convey what you have done through crisis media management is equally effective.



This change has also offered the opportunity now to be 'seen and judged' to have responded well, and this has often strengthened the market's view of an organisation. It is then seen as resilient and well prepared, and therefore an effective and efficient business, thus enhancing reputation.

However, for the crisis leader of today, this new dynamic has added a new skill set requirement – the ability to manage the response in terms of the media and the 'message' – the crisis communications aspects. We have definitely seen an increase in the desire to plan and train as businesses recognise crisis communications as a critical part of their response.

The speed of modern communications has had two impacts. Firstly, the creation of a new area of business criticality in e-mail/blackberry/data transfer and the major impact this dependency has for businesses. It means the crisis leader of today is expected to communicate with far greater frequency and connectivity than previously.

Secondly, there is an expectation of an organisation to communicate effectively and globally. The time available to crisis leaders has shrunk significantly in planning and decision-making terms, due to the ability to communicate with staff, stakeholders etc. faster and more effectively – there is no hiding – as we are seeing with many examples this year. There is an expectation that companies will communicate fast, and increasingly openly, about what is going on. They now have to face the issues raised by social media and citizen journalism, again bringing the public into the company via staff twittering and cameras enabling photographs which are immediately uploaded and available.

The time pressures on a crisis leader imposed by these changes have led to a new dynamic in terms of managing a response effectively. The need to focus outwardly as well as managing the response has become a key crisis leadership necessity.

How easy is it to establish who has the potential to be the most effective crisis leader and to what extent can this only really be assessed during an actual crisis?

Almost inevitably, leaders are selected by the virtue of their senior position within the internal hierarchy – which to some extent gives them authority and responsibility. This is a very difficult trend to avoid.

A few very mature organisations have begun to select crisis leaders through evidence of their practical ability to lead in the pressure of the crisis arena, and have managed to imbue them with unique authority for the crisis, over those to whom they would usually be subordinate. However, this is not the norm.

Those people selected from positions of authority usually have some of the capabilities required to be a crisis leader (although this is not guaranteed) but it can be disastrous if they cannot make the transition.

In our experience, the capabilities of crisis leaders can best be assessed during crisis simulations – and this is why we advocate them strongly. More organisations are now conducting scenario-based exercises to rehearse not only their plans but also the skills of their staff in their nominated crisis roles. Leaving the discovery of whether you have chosen a good leader to the point at which their abilities are truly critical to the potential survival of your organisation is risk taking of the highest order.

Would it be fair to say that being an effective crisis leader is as much about empowering others during the incident as it is about taking control yourself?

It is fair to say that empowering others is important. A good leader must be able to delegate effectively and clearly, empowering staff with the correct level of authority to make them as efficient as possible whilst retaining control of the truly critical and strategic aspects or decisions. This is the real art of crisis leadership!

To be an effective leader you have to be

able to delegate effectively and cleverly, whilst retaining the ability to influence where required and make decisions when critical – but your team have to be given freedom to be effective in their roles.

Research suggests that someone who is a good leader in one type of crisis might not be as effective in another? Would you agree?

A good leader can lead in any crisis, but less effective leaders may be able to lead in specific crisis scenarios where they are comfortable with either their knowledge or their team due to familiarity, but less capable when in unfamiliar territory.

The best leaders can continue in any eventuality – they manage the resources more effectively to cover knowledge gaps and recognise where risks lie that need mitigation.

How should success be measured in the context of crisis leadership?

Success is measured in two aspects really. Firstly, the establishment of stability from chaos in the early stages of a crisis, and secondly by the successful conclusion of a crisis with the minimum of impact on life, assets, business or reputation.

Crisis leaders are not always popular or liked – that is not necessary to be a good crisis leader – but everyone who works with a good crisis leader certainly knows it and respects them.



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