Leadership in Crisis: Staying Strong Under Fire

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Crises are inevitable, whether in our personal lives or out Emergency Services organizations. Leaders often face the daunting task of steering their personnel / departments through challenging times. Crisis may take many forms: natural disasters, scandals, or health emergencies. In each case, the role of leadership is critical to navigate the storm effectively. True leadership is tested not in moments of ease, but in those under fire. This article delves into the elements of strong leadership during a crisis and explores strategies leaders may use to stay resolute when faced with intense pressure.

**The Nature of Crisis Leadership**

A crisis is typically defined as a period of instability or danger, requiring immediate decision-making and action. For leaders, it presents a unique set of challenges. Crises are marked by uncertainty, high stakes, and a compressed timeline, all of which increase the psychological and emotional burden on leaders. Staying strong under fire in such situations requires a balance of decisiveness, empathy, and the ability to maintain a clear vision amidst chaos.

Leadership during a crisis differs fundamentally from leadership during normal times. A key aspect of this distinction is the increased level of scrutiny and pressure. “Monday Morning Quarterback” analysis of decisions made by leaders during a crisis are often placed under a microscope by the public, stakeholders, and the media. The margin for error is slim. The ability to remain composed, communicate effectively, and inspire confidence becomes paramount.

**Key Qualities of Leaders in Crisis**

Several key qualities separate effective crisis leaders from those who falter under pressure. These characteristics are essential for any leader looking to guide their team or organization through adversity.

**Composure and Emotional Intelligence**

Leaders who maintain their composure in high-stress situations inspire calmness in their teams. Emotional intelligence, which is the ability to understand, manage and use emotions in a constructive way, is a critical skill. By staying level-headed, leaders prevent panic and chaos from spreading throughout the organization. Additionally, emotional intelligence allows leaders to connect with the concerns of their people and offer empathy, helping build trust and cohesion.

**Decisiveness and Agility**

Crisis situations most often require swift action. Leaders must make decisions quickly, sometimes with incomplete information. The ability to act decisively, while remaining adaptable to changing conditions, is crucial. Agile leaders have the ability to pivot their strategies as new developments arise, ensuring their teams or organizations remain on the best possible course through the crisis.

**Communication**

Clear and transparent communication is essential in a crisis. Leaders must provide regular updates to all relevant stakeholders, including employees, customers, shareholders, and the public. Strong leaders also recognize the importance of two-way communication, where they actively listen to feedback, concerns, and ideas from their teams. This fosters a culture of openness and ensures that leaders have a full understanding of the situation on the ground.

**Vision and Strategic Thinking**

In times of crisis, it’s easy to get bogged down in the immediate challenges. However, effective leaders must maintain a long-term perspective, keeping the overall goals of the organization in focus. Strategic thinking helps leaders prioritize actions, allocate resources wisely, and develop contingency plans that prepare the organization for a range of possible outcomes.

Resilience

Resilience is the ability to withstand setbacks and persevere in the face of adversity. For leaders, resilience is essential to not only keep their own spirits up, but also to model perseverance for their teams. In a crisis, failures and mistakes are likely, but resilient leaders use these as learning opportunities and continue to press forward.

**Stages of Crisis Leadership**

Crises generally unfold in district phases, and leadership responses must evolve accordingly. Understanding these phases helps leaders apply the appropriate strategies and actions at each point.

**Pre-Crisis: Preparation and Risk Management**

Leaders who are proactive and prepare for potential crises are better positioned to navigate them when they arise. Crisis preparedness involves Critical Risk Analysis of your area and defines all the potential risks in Pigeon Forge. We decided to train on the risks, which involved training every firefighter in our county on the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) S-130 basic wildland firefighting, NWCG S-190 introduction to wildland fire behavior, and S-215 fire operation in wildland urban interface. This class was more dedicated to needs at the company office level. During this process we were working toward obtaining all the necessary PPE.

We have been fortunate enough to have had precious wildland fires in our area, which allowed us to host Type I Incident Management Team. We had all of the eleven fire departments in Sevier County develop a wildland task force team that could be activated during a wildland urban interface event. The proactiveness of the Sevier County Fire Chief’s Association lessened the risk of LODD during the Chimney Top II fires.

**Acute Crisis: Taking Charge**

As my father, who was a retired fire captain, repeated over the years “lead, follow, or get out of the way.” This is what happens when large wildland events occur. It is training that gets you through these events well. It is fact that you will not rise any higher than your training allows, so train when you are given the opportunity.

Once a crisis hits, leaders must immediately take control of the situation. This is the most intense and critical phase, requiring quick decision-making and rapid mobilization of resources. Effective leaders prioritize gathering accurate information, assessing the scope of the crisis, and identifying the most urgent needs. At this stage, leaders must ensure that communication is constant and transparent, both internally and externally.

**Chronic Crisis: Maintaining Focus**

This is the place most leaders find themselves most of the time, handling the big emergency, which is the place that I am the most comfortable. But this is not the only place that the leader must pull from in order to be ready for crisis, it also comes from personal life and work life experiences. In leadership, one is always under the microscope, especially if doing the job aggressively.

**Changing Fitness Culture:**

I have always been a large guy. When I began in the Emergency Services my weight began to climb. Reaching 475 pounds affected me in many ways, but one is that I would not require any fitness standard from my department if I could not lead from the front. I had always known that there was a fitness component. So, in 2020 I had weight loss surgery to help me and my department to be better fit for duty. We established fitness standards, and we set up a fire ground skill test that was timed. The attitude at the fire department was terrible when it came to this, but as soon as the Deputy Chief and I took the new standardized test the attitude changed for the better. None of this was easy and at times this was a department crisis, but it was one that got better over time. Today I think we are a very fit department. I do some type of physical activity at least five days a week before work time and some of that is devoted to the firefighter workout.

**Personal Crisis**

Another crisis that I brought on myself is being suspended for three days for showing up at a fire with the smell of ETOH on my breath. One of the side effects of my weight loss surgery is that I am not supposed to drink. I had consumed one drink at approximately 1800 hours and had gone to bed. We were dispatched to an all call for a fire very near my house. I did what I always do when there is a fire, I responded. I had never even considered going intoxicated and never had in the past. But the smell of ETOH was on my breath. That night I left the fire scene not feeling impaired in the least and returned home not knowing that there was a complaint lodged against me. I took full ownership of the event, and I was suspended for three days. But that was not all, I had damaged my department, my family, and I had to gain the trust of my department back. This has been very difficult, compounded by rumors perpetuated by fake Facebook accounts and people upset that my City Manager did not fire me.

As the crisis progresses and the immediate stock wears off, leaders must shift their focus to sustaining the response over time. The chronic crisis stage may last weeks, months, or even years, depending on the situation. Here, maintaining morale, resilience, and clear communication becomes even more critical. Leaders must also continue to reassess the situation and adjust their strategies as new information becomes available.

**Post-Crisis: Learning and Rebuilding**

The final phase of crisis leadership involves reflecting on what worked and what didn’t work during the crisis response. Leaders should conduct thorough reviews to identify strengths and weaknesses in their approach. The lessons learned during a crisis may then inform future preparedness and build organizational resilience. Rebuilding trust and morale is also a key focus in this phase, as teams and stakeholders may feel depleted after the crisis has passed.

**Challenges Leaders Face in a Crisis**

While leaders must embody strength during a crisis, they also face significant challenges that threaten their ability to lead effectively.

**Information Overload and Uncertainty**

In a crisis, leaders often face a flood of information, much of which is incomplete or unreliable. Sorting through this information to make informed decisions is a major challenge. Leaders must rely on trusted advisors and experts while avoiding the paralysis that may come from over-analyzing uncertain data.

**Emotional Toll and Burnout**

Crisis leadership is emotionally taxing. The pressure to make high-stakes decisions, combined with the responsibility for the well-being of employees, may take a heavy toll on leaders. Burnout is a real risk, particularly in prolonged crises. Leaders must take care of their mental and physical health to avoid exhaustion, which may then impair decision-making and leadership capacity.

**Public Scrutiny and Media Pressure**

During a crisis, leaders are often under intense scrutiny from the media, the public, and stakeholders. Negative media coverage, criticism, or public perception and staying true to core values are essential for leaders navigating such environments.

**Balancing Short-Term and Long-Term Needs**

Crises often create urgent demands that require immediate attention, but leaders must not lose sight of the long-term health of the organization. The balance between addressing pressing short-term needs and making decisions that benefit the organization’s future is delicate and may lead to difficult trade-offs.

**Examples of Leadership in Crisis**

Historical and contemporary examples of leadership in crisis provide valuable lessons for today’s leaders. Such case studies illustrate different approaches to crisis leadership and the qualities that define success or failure. One of the best examples of crisis leadership may be found in Winson Churchill during World War II. His leadership during that time is one of the most celebrated examples of crisis leadership. Faced with the existential threat of Nazi Germany, Churchill remained resolute and inspired the British people to endure through hardship. His famous speeches and unwavering commitment to victory exemplified emotional resilience, clear communication, and strategic vision. It is empowering and necessary to seek out such examples and learn from their leadership values, strategies, and tactics.

Leaders may employ several strategies to stay under fire and lead effectively during a crisis.

**The Necessity of Relying on a Strong Support System**

No leader can handle a crisis alone. Building a strong support network of trusted advisors, team members, and personal mentors is essential. Leaders who delegate appropriately and seek counsel when needed are better equipped to handle the complexities of a crisis.

**Practice Self-Care**

In the intensity of a crisis, leaders often neglect their own well-being. However, self-care is critical to maintaining long-term effectiveness. Leaders should prioritize physical health, such as sleep, exercise and nutrition, as well as mental health practices such as mindfulness, journaling or meditation to prevent burnout.

**Stay Grounded in Core Values**

In the moments of a crisis, it is easy to be swayed by external pressures or immediate concerns. Leaders who stay grounded in their core values are better able to make decisions that align with the long-term vision and ethical standards of their organization. This also builds trust with teams and stakeholders, who are more likely to rally behind a leader they see as principled.

**Cultivate Flexibility**

Flexibility is key to crisis leadership. Leaders must be willing to pivot strategies, reconsider initial decisions, and remain open to new solutions. A rigid approach may lead to missed opportunities or exacerbate the crisis. Leaders who embrace change and adapt to new realities will be more successful in steering through the storm.

In conclusion, leadership is a crisis is a true test of character, capability, and resilience. It requires a combination of decisiveness, emotional intelligence, communication skills, and strategic thinking. While crises are challenging and often unpredictable, they also present opportunities from growth and innovation. Leaders who have the capacity to stay strong under fire – maintaining their composure, acting decisively, and inspiring confidence in others – are the ones who will not only survive the crisis, but also emerge stronger on the other side.