

LEADING IN A CRISIS

six mistakes

ERIC J. MCNULTY and his colleagues have identified the six most common mistakes leaders make during a crisis. Here, he outlines those mistakes and the steps you can take to avoid them.

THINK TANK: RESEARCH, IDEAS AND OPINION INFLUENCING COMMUNICATION AND THE WORKPLACE



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Executives increasingly find themselves caught in the role of crisis leader and manager. A simple scan of the headlines reveals many common examples: a product recall, corporate scandal, unexpected death of an executive, sudden loss of liquidity, weather-related destruction, or a hostile takeover bid, to name but a few. As a communication professional you may be the public face of a response or a key advisor to your CEO. The stakes – and the pressure – will be high.

Having observed hundreds of leaders in these high-pressure, high-stakes situations – from earthquakes to terrorist bombings and beyond – my colleagues and I at the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative have identified the six most common mistakes leaders make when confronted with a crisis and the steps to avoid them.

Our research has focused on emergency preparedness and disaster response leaders. These are people who are highly trained and educated to handle crisis situations, and yet they can fall victim to the same six common mistakes. Your crises might seem more mundane but the dynamics that lead to these mistakes are quite similar. Fortunately, that doesn't have to be the case.

We have distilled many of the leadership lessons into a framework we term "meta-leadership". There are five dimensions of meta-leadership practice: mastering

1. yourself;
2. the situation;
3. your organizational base;
4. your boss; and
5. your peers and the extended organization.

Each of these is key to avoiding common crisis leadership mistakes.

This framework was put to a very public and practical test during the H1N1 influenza outbreak in the Spring of 2009. A broad section of the leadership responsible for the response had attended the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative, where they learned the principles of meta-leadership. A public opinion survey conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health as the first danger subsided found that 88 percent of those questioned gave public health officials who managed the H1N1 flu response a "very satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" rating. This is a clear sign of renewed confidence in government leaders that marked significant progress since Hurricane Katrina (when just 38% of respondents gave the government marks of "excellent/good" in an ABC News poll). Even as cases continued to rise there was no public panic, which is evidence of a successful response.

The leaders of the H1N1 response for the most part avoided these six common mistakes. Will you?

Mistake 1 Getting stuck in your "emotional basement"

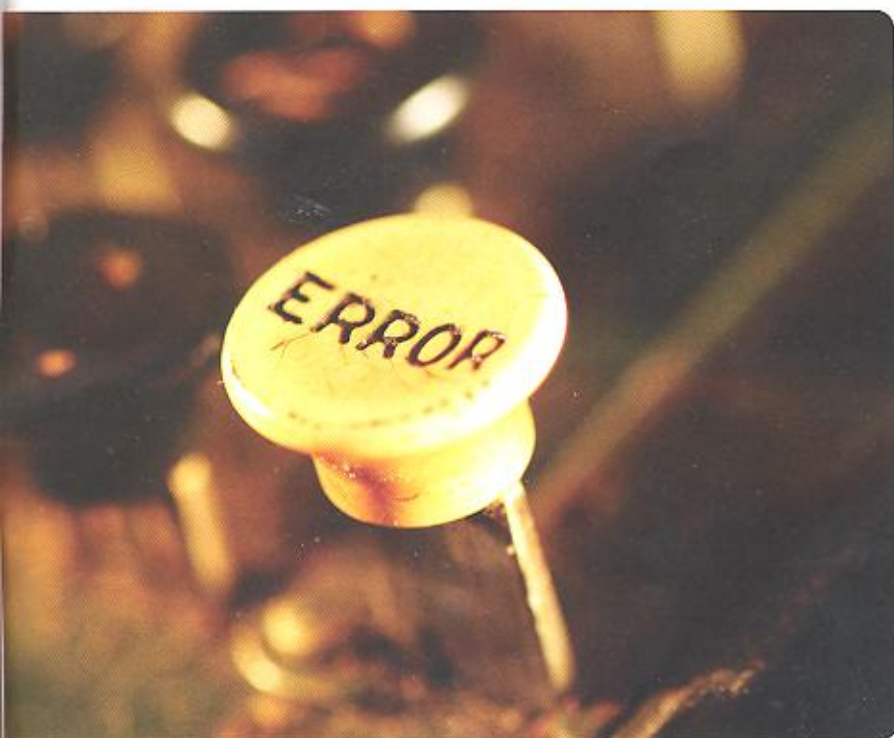
We humans are hard-wired for a primitive part of the brain to assert control of our thinking when we face

IS you're bound to make *(unless you read this)*

a threat. It triggers a survival response: fight, freeze, or flee. It is virtually impossible to think and lead strategically in this state of mind. You have to consciously climb up, often through the use of practiced protocols and procedures (think of fire drill instructions as an example: go to nearest stairwell and proceed out of the building). Performing these routine actions moves you up to mid-brain functioning, because these rote behaviors reduce stress and improve focus, and from there you can reactivate your strategic thinking. Getting out of the emotional basement requires great self-awareness, self-regulation and emotional intelligence.

In a crisis, you, your colleagues and your CEO will go to your "basement". There will be a ripple effect that may take your whole operation to the basement. They need you to help them climb up and out. As you advise whoever is the public face in the crisis, work with them to keep their manner measured. This will help instill confidence and calm among their audience. People model the behavior of the leader.

Give people jobs to do in order to help them regain equilibrium. Feeling competent even at something menial helps people come out of the basement. ▶



KEY POINTS

- ▶ Members of the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative in the US have pinpointed six mistakes that leaders most commonly make when dealing with a crisis, and the steps that can be taken to avoid them.
- ▶ Their leadership lessons can be distilled into a framework they term "meta-leadership", the five elements of which are key to avoiding the common crisis mistakes.
- ▶ A short video on the Five Dimensions of Meta-Leadership, presented by Dr Barry Dorn from the NPLI can be viewed at www.meta-leadershipsummit.org/resources

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◀ Mistake 2

Deny the crisis, ignore its impact and – as a result – fail to take actions that could mitigate the impact

People tend to go through three delusions before they acknowledge a crisis for what it is: it won't happen here, it won't happen now, and it won't happen to me. The response to the safety problems faced by Toyota in 2009 offers myriad examples. The company's view was markedly different from that of the media and the public. People may fear the embarrassment of a false alarm or are over-confident in their own systems and processes. However, the consequences can be far greater if the crisis is real and you fail to take appropriate actions. And if something is a crisis in the eyes of your customers, it's a crisis no matter what your data say.

By exercising well-grounded situational awareness, asking questions and probing assumptions (your own and those of others) you can help determine what is actually happening and help others see it as

well. Leaders often want to leap into action and fail to ask questions. Staying curious will serve you well, as any crisis evolves over time and so, too, must your response. The more open-minded you are, the better able you'll be to match your strategies and actions to what is actually at hand.

Mistake 3

Adjusting the facts to fit the plan, rather than adjusting the plan to fit the facts

Many organizations have business continuity or crisis response plans that prescribe actions based on certain operational assumptions. It's common for leaders to execute the plan before determining if their assumptions align with the actual circumstances. An example from Hurricane Katrina: officials we observed in the emergency response center in Baton Rouge were still responding to a “wind event” (the plan) long after the collapse of levees in New Orleans had turned the situation into a “water event” (the reality), that required a very different response. We call this “the success paradox”: leaders assess a situation with a pre-determined definition of success based on their planning. It can be hard for them to shift gears even in the face of extensive evidence that they are headed down the wrong path. Part of succeeding in their minds is validating the plans: they don't want to believe that the plans are wrong.



2 + 2 = 5

THINK TANK: LEADING IN A CRISIS

Use your plan as a starting point – it can help you get up from the basement – but be prepared to adjust your actions based on what is really happening. An actual crisis will rarely, if ever, play out as expected no matter how detailed your planning or how extensive your training exercises.

Mistake 4

Failure to create clear lines of authority and responsibility, decision-making protocols and a common crisis vocabulary

Crises often bring new actors together on unfamiliar terrain: marketing or manufacturing is suddenly thrown together with legal and investor relations, perhaps an outside body like law enforcement or the Securities and Exchange Commission is involved, or the CEO is interacting with technical specialists with whom he/she has never had much contact. Each of these parties will come with different expectations, understandings of jurisdiction and authority, modes of functioning and jargon, and other operational assumptions.

Your “boss” in the crisis may be someone with whom you’ve never had a relationship. The result can be overlaps in effort, gaps in activity, or simply misunderstandings that can diminish, or even destroy, the efficacy of your response. An effective crisis leader ensures that there is clear understanding and agreement about who is doing what, who is making which decisions, and who must be informed under which circumstances about the different facets of the initiative.

Standard hierarchical distinctions, often silo-based, must give way to a unified crisis response structure that matches the right experience and expertise with the relevant need.

Additionally, technical experts with specific knowledge must be able to offer counsel that is unvarnished, and unfiltered by political calculations or consequences, all the way up to the senior-most executive. It is critical that senior decision makers have the most accurate picture possible of the situation and their options for action. Standard hierarchical structures can serve to inhibit the communication of critical information or erect bureaucratic barriers to rapid action. A critical part of the role of the communication leader is to ensure that everyone feels safe to speak truth to power.

Mistake 5

Over-dedicating resources to “screamers”

These are people who make the most noise, demand the most attention, or otherwise disrupt the response disproportionate to their impact on or importance to the desired outcome. This may be a senior executive, board member, reporter, customer or other person who feels that their needs have to be tended to

immediately even if doing so could undermine the success of the larger effort. The challenge is to lead up, down and across all of the affected parties simultaneously – often more through influence than formal authority – to achieve the greater good. Example: during the response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 one local official managed to get onto cable news almost every evening. His locality was a small part of the overall response and officials had to be careful not to direct more resources than called for to address his needs.

Mistake 6

Leaders often fail to take care of themselves during a crisis

As a result, they make it difficult for others to take care of themselves. Performance degrades over time when we are under stress. Leaders often are afraid to take time away from the response, setting the expectation that everyone must be on duty around the clock to the point of physical and emotional exhaustion. No matter the crisis, rest is essential. The US Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) emergency control center was active 24/7 during the H1N1 pandemic. The acting director, Dr Richard Besser was frequently in front of the media. He also, however, took time off and made sure that others did as well. He sent a memo to his staff not only telling them that he was going to spend a day with his family but detailed the activities they planned. These actions gave both explicit and implicit permission for the others working in the emergency response center to take time as well. Relaxation and rejuvenation are critical for maintaining sound judgment and decision-making capability.

A secondary benefit was that being away gave a vote of confidence to the others on the team that they were capable of managing the response in his absence. Building team confidence and trust makes it easier for individuals to hand off responsibility to their colleagues and delegate the many tasks and decisions more broadly across the team.

Leading in a crisis is never easy. However, your chances of success are greatly enhanced if you understand the most common pitfalls and take proactive steps to avoid them. SEM

ONCE THE CRISIS ENDS, WHAT NEXT?

Read our online article on “Steering leaders out of a crisis using effective communication” by Bill Quirke.

➔ Go to www.internalcommshub.com/leaderscrisis