

A Guide to Crisis Management Leadership



Leadership in Crisis Management

Effective crisis leadership is crucial to enhancing organisational resilience – the ability of an organisation to withstand the deleterious impacts of crises and seize positive opportunities when they present themselves. An important component of effective crisis leadership is the propensity to encourage others within the organisation to lead during periods of uncertainty and disruption.

Rare, though, are those kinds of C-suite executives, even as periods of uncertainty and disruption become the norm. How can leaders turn things around?

Well, according to best-practice guidance, such as international standard ISO 22316, businesses need to develop leaders with the following attributes:

- Encouraging of a culture supportive of resilience
- Adaptable to changing circumstances
- Deploy a diverse set of skills, knowledge, and behaviour(s) to achieve organisational objectives

Prioritisation, of course, is the only way to encourage effective leadership in times of crisis. Organisations with resilient leaders, primed for crises, have typically prioritised the following:

- Roles and responsibilities for enhancing organisational resilience
- Creating and sharing of lessons learned about successes and failures
- Promoting the adoption of better practices
- Empowering all levels of the organisation to make decisions that protect and enhance organisational resilience

Three behaviours that help leaders manage a crisis

That's not to say the quality of leadership in crisis management doesn't matter. Fortunately for good business leaders, effective crisis leadership (versus crisis management) isn't necessarily about picking up new capabilities.

Crisis expert, Tim Johnson, here, puts it best when he explains that crisis leadership doesn't require adding new skills, instead it entails demonstrating core leadership competencies under crisis conditions.

Core competencies or leadership styles in times of crisis include the following:



Situational awareness.

Even in the business-as-usual context, leaders will need to sift through information coming from different sources quickly and accurately.

That makes situational awareness critical. Situational awareness, of course, is simply being fully aware of one's surroundings, i.e., perceiving elements in the environment, comprehending the meaning of those elements, and projecting the (evolving) status of that meaning into the near future¹.

Situational awareness only becomes more important in the crisis context, when the environment itself is fluid, the information needed to comprehend the meaning of elements more scattered, and the ability to project into the future more challenging.



Overcoming bias.

That's also when human biases that distort objective analysis interpose themselves, as well. It's a fact of cognitive science that stress makes decision making more irrational, hurried, and unsystematic.

What's more, stress can impair working memory, increase distraction, lower reaction time, and reduce the very ability to process information. Decision making under stress also makes people more susceptible to group pressures, prejudices, and constraints, all biases that militate against achieving situational awareness.

Overcoming bias in the crisis leadership context entails understanding what the biases that reduce situational awareness are. The main biases include deference to authority, overconfidence, and satisfaction with one's explanations.



Effective communication.

Good crisis leaders communicate clearly and quickly, across their various functional areas. When necessary, they also communicate effectively with other organisations and stakeholders, such as first responders, the media, and government agencies.

Two of the biggest communication blockers for ordinary leaders, however, come from organisational silos and interorganisational miscommunication. Organisational silos are not unique to crises, but they tend to get worse during critical events.

Indeed, research shows that, during normal operations, people tend to share more information with members of their own group than with other groups. But during extreme events, they often assume someone else in the organisation is sharing that informationⁱⁱ. As a result, organisational silos and information sharing get worse at the exact time they need to get better.

Interorganisational miscommunication, on the other hand, happens because teams who work together every day develop shared mental frameworks and vocabularies that they use to make sense of the world.

That is, they speak a distinct language that people outside the organisation (or even department) don't readily grasp. During normal operations, that's not an issue. But in a crisis, an effective response requires everyone to share more information than usual.

Good leaders intervene, here, ensuring that their teams have the information they need to complete critical tasks before, during, and after a crisis. Leaders also ensure that their teams are both giving and receiving information and using a standardised vocabulary. To be ready to do that, leaders are directly involved in the crisis planning process.



Training.

Good leaders make maximum use of the controlled, risk managed environment of exercises and testing. That environment helps them to identify the problems with and solutions to latent issues with their crisis management practices and reinforce a culture of competency that values the role of exercises and testing.

Finally, it takes an ongoing commitment to effective crisis leadership to be ready to lead during a crisis. Amplifying some business-as-usual leadership techniques, such as situational resilience, and rehearsing them in the crisis training environment, should help leaders protect their organisations as new risks emerge.

Indeed, good crisis leaders make the best, data-driven decisions possible decisions. Here, the right crisis management software, such as Noggin's, helps leaders keep track of incidents at a glance, automate the flow of information, and drive the necessary improvements that ensure organisational resilience.



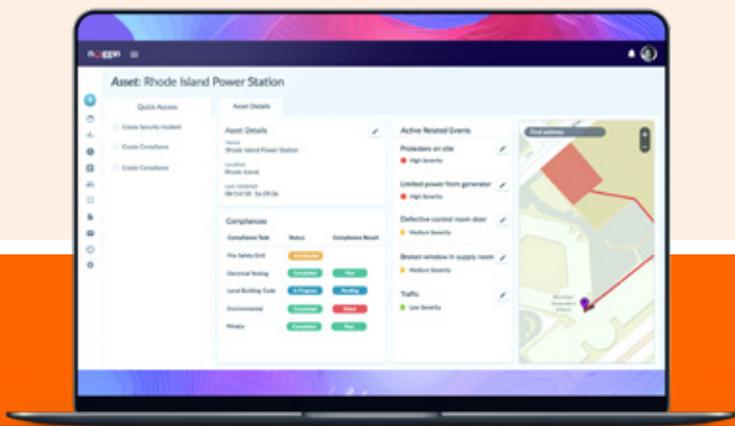
Sources

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- ii. Joseph W. Pfeiffer, Harvard Kennedy School Program on Crisis Leadership: *Crisis Leadership: The Art of Adapting to Extreme Events*. Available at <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/research-initiatives/crisisleadership/files/Pfeifer%20Crisis%20Leadership--March%2020%202013.pdf>.



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