

How to Lead Through a Crisis

When faced with a crisis, most leaders are forced to think and behave in ways that feel unfamiliar. Whether it's a technological, financial, natural, or health crisis — at work or in the community — crises demand that leaders take an emergency response plan and adapt it as new evidence and factors present themselves.

All the while, effective leaders are able to remain calm and maintain a sense of perspective. According to Gene Klann, author of our book *Crisis Leadership* <<https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/crisis-leadership-center-for-creative-leadership-guidebook.pdf>>, “During a crisis, your goal is to reduce loss and keep things operating as normal as possible.”

Especially as organizational leaders face the current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and associated disruptions in the global economy, Klann recommends the following 5 actions to prepare and respond.

5 Ways to Lead and Adapt Through a Crisis

1. Seek credible information.

As a leader, it's your responsibility to determine the most reliable, up-to-date information from trustworthy news sources. “Avoid getting information only from social media, and be wary of any news organizations that have a political, financial, or activist agenda,” says Klann. “Their information may be biased and, to varying degrees, inaccurate.”

In the current case of the coronavirus, Klann recommends consulting state and local health services, the World Health Organization <<https://www.who.int/>> — which provides rolling updates — and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <<https://www.cdc.gov/>>, where you can find advice on how to prepare and take action, whether you're at home or affiliated with K-12 schools and childcare programs, universities, mass gatherings, etc.

2. Use appropriate communication channels.

Once essential information is gathered, it should be disseminated to the entire organization by every means possible. Transparency is key. “Information is the oil that greases an organization and keeps it running smoothly,” Klann says. “This is especially true during a crisis.”

Information is powerful because it:

- * reduces emotional distress caused by the unknown,
- * diminishes fear,
- * provides tactical guidance, and
- * demonstrates to employees that their leaders are concerned, involved, knowledgeable, and on top of the situation.

How to communicate? Face-to-face first, whether in person or through virtual channels <<https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/best-practices-for-managing-virtual->

[teams-and-meetings/](#)>. With a plethora of tools for hosting and personalizing virtual meetings, quarantines don't have to stand in the way of your group coming together face-to-face.

"Key information should be handled with the 3 Rs: review, repeat, reinforce," Klann adds. "If information is shared only once, it cannot be assumed everyone has received it — or if they did, that they understand it."

Repeating and reinforcing information on a daily basis and via multiple delivery methods helps it to sink in and be retained.

"Remember, when information regarding what is happening is scarce or non-existent, people revert to gossip and rumors and also tend to 'MSU' it. That is: Make Stuff Up," Klann says. "Invariably, what they make up will be worse than reality, no matter how bad reality is."

3. Explain what your organization is doing about the crisis.

During a crisis, time is compressed. The initial onset of a crisis presents immense pressure to act — and act quickly. Sometimes you have to begin tackling a problem before you have a solid grasp of what's happening.

If you are in charge, take charge. Be proactive; take initiative. Do something even if it might be wrong; paralysis or over analyzing is riskier. As you make decisions and take action, communicate those actions truthfully and honestly.

"With the coronavirus, you might choose to reduce air travel, ask more people to work from home, place hand sanitizer in strategic places within the facilities, encourage those with the sniffles or a cough to stay home, and frequently clean high-trafficked areas or objects and surfaces," Klann says. As your response changes, keep employees updated with the 3 Rs.

Remember that everyone observing or living through a crisis views it through a unique lens. For example, a paramedic will understand only that a hospital is overloaded; a hospital administrator will only know that the generator isn't working. Keep in mind that no one will have a complete, accurate picture of what's going on.

4. Be present, visible, and available.

During a crisis, leaders should be accessible. Because it's not always possible to walk around your facility and talk to colleagues in person, let employees know how they can best reach you with status updates and questions. "Particularly during a crisis, employees have a need to hear from their leaders frequently. When leaders appear calm, concerned, knowledgeable, and in charge, workers feel encouraged and are more likely to have confidence that things are under control and will be fine," says Klann.

Understand that organizational protocol needs to account for flexible leadership ranks during an emergency. Whoever is in charge is whoever is there. An entire operation cannot be hamstrung because bureaucracy didn't account for a key player being unavailable when an emergency struck.

5. Dedicate organizational resources for future crises.

As any crisis transitions from its urgent phase, the time pressure will ease, as will the need for split-second decisions. At that point, the plan must evolve into a more complex system that looks at recovery and getting things back to normal — whatever the new normal looks like.

If a similar emergency unfolds in the future, will you be prepared? “All leaders will admit that crisis planning — for example, having a Crisis Action Plan and setting aside resources for a crisis — are important,” says Klann. “But experience shows that key resources are seldom placed in reserve for contingencies. And if they are, they’re usually inadequate.”

While improvisation cannot be planned, thinking and team-building exercises can be built into a training program that prepares everyone for a similar, future crisis.

Relationships Matter During a Crisis

During a crisis, leaders who have built a personal, relational, and cultural foundation can then focus on the immediacy of the moment. According to Klann, effective crisis leaders often do the following.

4 Ways to Stay in the Present

1. Face your emotions.

Recognizing and managing the emotions of the situation — others’ as well as your own — can help with individual and group resiliency, getting people to safety, and then back to normal (or a new normal). People with an imbalanced emotional state don’t process well. It is important to do anything you can to reduce the emotional stress on people while “doing the job.”

2. Show respect.

Treat people with sincere consideration and genuine concern. Show it by paying attention, listening, and responding to what people are telling you, as well as considering what is not being said.

3. Make connections.

Draw on a sense of loyalty, courage, morality, or other principles that tie your crisis response to what is important to people.

4. Be positive.

A leader’s attitude is contagious. Leaders are dealers in hope. Even in extreme crisis, an upbeat, can-do attitude keeps people going.

Maintaining Perspective in a Crisis

During a crisis, leaders are often focused on the emotional turmoil of their direct reports and others in the organization, but it's equally important for leaders to take care of themselves.

"A crisis can exert a high impact on human needs, emotions, and behaviors," says Klann. "We may not be conscious of this, but our behaviors send messages to others about our own underlying needs and emotions."

Whatever leadership role you play, you need to be aware of your own emotional turmoil, its effect on your behavior, and its influence on your leadership abilities.

Take these actions to keep the perspective you need to bring your people and your organization through a crisis.

4 Ways to Stay Cool in a Crisis

1. Think "today."

Take the crisis one day at a time.

2. Focus on the positive.

Avoid negative people, negative thoughts, and negative talk. Constantly think positive thoughts and tell yourself that you can do it.

3. Get grounded.

Take 5-minute private breaks. Practice relaxation techniques, such as meditation and deep breathing. Don't neglect spiritual exercises and activities as they fit your individual beliefs.

4. Prioritize and focus.

Keep meetings short or "on the hoof," where everyone stands. Be more assertive. Say "no" more often. Be more conscious about managing your time and priorities. Concentrate on only major issues. Skip secondary tasks.

Finally, Klann advises leaders in times of crisis to remember the big picture. "Concentrate on the greater vision you have of yourself, both personally and professionally. Think about where you will be and what you will be doing a year from now," he says. "Stop and realize that you are alive and that much good will come out of the crisis."

By paying attention to your own emotions, needs, and behaviors, you will be better prepared to handle the human dimensions of the crisis. As a result, you will be more capable of containing the crisis, regaining control, minimizing damage, and effectively preventing, defusing, and reducing the duration of an extremely difficult leadership situation.

For more tips on leading in times of turmoil, access the full text of Klann's book, Crisis Leadership<<https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/crisis-leadership-center-for-creative-leadership-guidebook.pdf>>: Using Military Lessons, Organizational Experiences, and the Power of Influence to Lesson the Impact of Chaos on the People you Lead<<https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/crisis-leadership-center-for-creative-leadership-guidebook.pdf>>.

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