



Article: Crisis Leadership Coaching

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In recent years the business environment has become extremely volatile. Global economic instability, efficiency by specialism and the rise in consumer power have made organisations vulnerable at the same time that terrorism and organised crime have become commonplace. Many rely on hyper-extended, and often opaque, supply chains and each day we read about organisations, facing some form of crisis or another triggered by a diverse range of situations such as: severe weather, data losses, natural disasters, product recalls, corporate fraud, compliance failures, sexual harassment, workplace violence, fire and pandemic to name a but a few.

If the crisis is handled well, the organisation flourishes. If the crisis is handled badly the immediate and long-term impacts on the organisation's profitability, reputation and market position can be very bad indeed, and often terminal.

Successful crisis leadership used to be guaranteed by restoring the status quo through effective direct command and control and heroics¹. But the 21st century crisis leader now needs to be able to inspire and motivate others to achieve exceptional feats, foster the acceptance of group goals and, because organisational agility and adaption are fundamental in today's fast moving marketplace, they need to be able to challenge the status quo and implement rapid and effective organisational change².

Crisis leadership is now therefore much more than the ability to make rational decisions and managing the actions of others. The crisis leader must be action-oriented and display directive leadership, they must also communicate widely with honesty, be adept at managing multi-disciplinary teams in fast moving and stressful situations and be adaptable and flexible. They must also be calm and decisive in even the most trying situations.

All of the above are skills that can be taught or enhanced through the use of a good mentor. However, there is a strong emotional and behavioural element to successful crisis leadership and this article looks at what those elements are and how they can be enhanced through coaching.

¹ James, E. H., & Wooten, L. P. (2005). *Leadership as (un)usual: How to display competence in times of crisis*. *Organizational Dynamics*, 34(2), 141-152.

² Shaw, G., & Harrauld, J. (2004). *Identification of the core competencies required of executive level business crisis and continuity managers*. *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management*, 1(1), 3-18.

What is an Organisational Crisis and what does a leader do to solve one?

There are many definitions of an “organisational crisis”. Some of the definitions frame the concept around negative human emotions. For example, an event that “causes severe emotional and social distress, which may occur at any time and without warning”³, or “any emotionally charged situation that, once it becomes public, invites negative stakeholder reaction, and thereby has the potential to threaten the financial wellbeing, reputation, or survival of the firm”⁴. Other definitions focus purely on the potential for operational business disruption or the characteristics of the threat. For example, “unexpected and unpredictable circumstances that threaten the key mechanisms of a firm”⁵ or “low-probability and high-consequence events and are generally characterized by ambiguity”⁶.

Although a definition that is applicable to every organisation in every situation is probably elusive, most researchers and practitioners agree that there are three factors that influence the severity and scope of the crisis: the atmosphere that triggers the crisis (both external and internal); the reactions towards crisis (both by individuals and the organization as a whole); and the measures taken in the event of crisis⁷. Further, there is general agreement that if a crisis is handled well, organisations can seize the opportunities

associated with the ambiguity of the situation and emerge the other side better and stronger than when they went in^{8,9}.

However, economic instability, disruptive technologies, hyper-extended supply chains and consumer power has created a level of organisational complexity that requires a coordinated multi-disciplinary team effort to determine what is happening and what best to do about it.

This means that responding to a crisis is a “team sport”, requiring the combined skills and expertise from right across the business and beyond. But because a 21st century organisational crisis requires the business to manage the disruption whilst simultaneously transforming themselves so that they are well positioned to prosper in the environment that emerges after the crisis has been solved the skills and behaviours of the leadership are now the primary determinant of organisational success or failure^{10,11}.

The modern crisis leader therefore needs to be much more than someone who can keep a cool head and coordinate a complex response. They need to be able to create a vision for the post-crisis future that people can buy into, they need to be able to see a clear path toward that vision and they need to be able to inspire people to follow them. In short they need to be expert at sense making, change management, risk taking, two-way

³ MacNeil, W. & Topping, K. (2007). *Crisis management in schools: Evidence-based prevention*. Journal of Educational Inquiry, 7(1), 64-94.

⁴ James, E. H. & Wooten, L. P. (2005). *How to display competence in times of crisis*. Organizational Dynamics, 24, 146.

⁵ Barton, L. (1994). *Crisis Management: Preparing for and Managing Disasters*, The Cornell and Restaurant Administration Quarterly, 35(2), 59.

⁶ Pearson, C., & Clair, J. (1998). *Reframing crisis management*. Academy of Management Review, 23(1), 59-76.

⁷ Milburn, T.W., Schuler, R.S. & Watman, K.H. (1983). *Organizational Crisis. Part I: Definition and Conceptualization*. Human Relations, 36(12), s.1148-1149.

⁸ Brockner, J. & James, E. H. (2008). *Towards an understanding of when executives see crisis as opportunity*. The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 44(1), 94-115.

⁹ Rochet, C., Keramidias, O. & Bout, L. (2008). *Crisis as change strategy in public organizations*. International Review of Administrative Sciences, 74(1), 65-77.

¹⁰ Bligh, M.C., Kohles, J.C. and Meindl, J.R., (2004). *Charting the language of leadership: A methodological investigation of President Bush and the crisis of 9/11*. Journal of Applied Psychology, 89(3), p.562.

¹¹ Mumford, M. D., Friedrich, T. L., Caughron, J. J., & Byrne, C. L. (2007). *Leader cognition in real-world settings: How do leaders think about crises?*. The Leadership Quarterly, 18(6), 515-543.

communication and public relations if they are to effectively influence the individuals within their organisation and other stakeholders to work together and foster the organisational agility required to respond to fast moving situations¹².

How does Crisis Coaching help?

At the most basic level, training, advising, mentoring and teaching **puts in** information and skills. Coaching **pulls out** capacities such as clear thinking, vision and emotional intelligence.

Throughout our business lives we encounter lots of information and skills input. For example, we may study to become a doctor, lawyer or accountant where we learn the technical knowledge and skills, we will need to practice our chosen profession. When we join an organisation, we probably do many organisation-related courses such as data security, business conduct and ethics together with on-the-job training to hone our skills and knowledge. Some of us will also study for a Master of Business Administration (MBA) that provides an overview of key business practices.

However, a Crisis Leader needs more than just technical competence. They need to be able to make their own difficult judgement calls, create their own vision and bring it to life in a way that influences people to follow them.

None of these can be taught – but all can be coached.

Charisma & Vision

Charisma is often described as a compelling attractiveness or charm that can inspire

devotion in others. Charisma allows Crisis Leaders to influence people to achieve exceptional results, through the use of emotionally evocative and engaging images of the future¹³. Followers identify personally with the leader, which motivates them to meet the leader's expectations¹⁴. They internalise the beliefs, goals and values presented by the leader, which prompts them to behave in ways that would be expected by the leader. And a leader who displays charisma builds contagious self-confidence in their followers, which allows them to collectively perform above and beyond their normal expectations¹⁵.

It was once thought that charisma was a enigmatic attribute that was only possessed by a few individuals. However, there is an art and science to the primary influencing mechanism associated with charisma: namely the formation of viable, emotionally engaging visions in which followers are willing to invest their identity¹⁶.

Likewise, there are behaviours, such as self-sacrifice and the role modelling of desirable behaviours, that are commonly exhibited by charismatic leaders and serve to reinforce the influence they are able to exert¹⁷.

All the above are susceptible to coaching. On the behavioural front, the aim is to simultaneously project your own value while making others feel valued. Techniques such as Active Listening, whereby the listener observes and interprets the speaker's behaviour and body language to develop a more accurate understanding of the message and then demonstrates understanding through paraphrasing the speaker's words, can be used

¹² Shaw, G., & Harrald, J. (2004). *Identification of the core competencies required of executive level business crisis and continuity managers*. Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, 1(1), 3-18.

¹³ Conger, J. A., & Kanungo, R. N. (1998). *Charismatic leadership in organizations*. Sage Publications.

¹⁴ Shamir, B., House, R. J., & Arthur, M. B. (1993). *The motivational effects of charismatic leadership: A self-concept based theory*. Organization science, 4(4), 577-594.

¹⁵ Bono, J. E., & Ilies, R. (2006). *Charisma, positive emotions and mood contagion*. The Leadership Quarterly, 17(4), 317-334.

¹⁶ Strange, J. M., & Mumford, M. D. (2005). *The origins of vision: Effects of reflection, models, and analysis*. The Leadership Quarterly, 16(1), 121-148.

¹⁷ Yorges, S. L., Weiss, H. M., & Strickland, O. J. (1999). *The effect of leader outcomes on influence, attributions, and perceptions of charisma*. Journal of Applied Psychology, 84(3), 428.

to great effect. It forces the leader to pay full attention to the followers as individuals and makes them feel valued and special. Active Listening is great in theory but requires practice and coaching to master in such a way that it appears authentic.

Being able to master your own body language can also help the Crisis Leader project their own value and increase the chances of devotion. Good posture and a deepened voice signals strength, a wide stance suggests authority and an open body indicates trust. Body language works so well that it has become normal practice for senior executives and politicians use coaches to pull out the image they wish to project¹⁸.

With reference to constructing compelling vision, to achieve maximum influence it must satisfy the following five criteria:

1. It must present a positive path to solving the crisis.
2. It must encourage participation in this future in positive, emotionally evocative terms.
3. Investment in the vision must create a sense of personal identity.
4. The vision must be able to promote a shared identity.
5. The vision must be capable of being characterised as a functional social system with norms, standards and values.

To create visions that meet these criteria, a leader needs to be able to draw on their abilities of sensemaking, constructing mental models, self-reflection and planning. However, a Crisis Leader also needs the ability to create them in a high stress environment, which means that decision making under stress and uncertainty together with the self-discipline to manage exceptional loads are also necessary traits.

As with mastering body language and techniques such as Active Listening, the creation of a vision must appear authentic and not contrived if it is to inspire. 1:1 coaching combined with practice using realistic scenarios have been shown to be extremely effective.

Strategic Thinking

Research on historical crises shows that there are two facets of strategic thinking that are particularly useful for the Crisis Leader¹⁹:

- The ability to analyse the situation (sometimes called Mission Analysis)
- Understanding the big picture

Being able to analyse the situation involves the ability to see beyond tactical actions to mitigate symptoms. To do this, in addition to being expert at the rational learned activities such as information gathering, structured sensemaking, determining constraints and root cause analysis, the Crisis Leader also needs to be able to promote the unearthing of innovative information and ideas from their followers and challenge habitual thinking.

Understanding the big picture requires a fusion of emotional intelligence and information fusion that allows the Crisis Leader to create a narrative of the situation that takes into account not simply the raw data and information but the nuances of where the data and information came from.

Coaching helps the Crisis Leader to develop the confidence and gravitas to understand and inspire their followers so that they can rapidly rise above the tactical and concentrate on the strategy.

¹⁸ Borg, J. (2009). *Body language: 7 easy lessons to master the silent language*. FT press.

¹⁹ DeChurch, L. A., Burke, C. S., Shuffler, M. L., Lyons, R., Doty, D., & Salas, E. (2011). A

historiometric analysis of leadership in mission critical multiteam environments. The Leadership Quarterly, 22(1), 152-169.

Expressing Emotion

During “business as usual” research shows that it is generally not a great idea for leaders to express their emotions in public²⁰.

Displays of anger are often seen as a lack of self-control, sadness is often seen as emotionally instability and erodes confidence and laughing when there is nothing to laugh about makes you look inauthentic.

However, in organisational crisis situations being able to express sadness and compassion as a leader signals that you care about the plight of other people and has been shown to effectively diffuse negative emotional responses in the workforce and other stakeholders²¹.

Organisational crises can create feelings of fear, stress, anxiety and grief in employees, clients, suppliers and other stakeholders. In extreme circumstances, such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters or hostile takeovers, these feelings may be so extreme that people exhibit intense physical and emotional reactions which can result in an inability to react to the situation²².

In a crisis situation, speed is often the essence, and paralysis or inaction will greatly reduce the chances of a successful outcome. Therefore, Crisis Leaders who are able to regulate their own emotions to such an extent that they can exhibit emotional reactions specifically to influence the behaviours of their followers will be the most effective.

In Summary

A crisis is a decisive moment for an organisation. It is often a time of great danger, but equally a turning point that, if handled well, will result in increased corporate value.

Although a “team-sport”, the outcome largely rests on the ability of the Crisis Leader to

create a positive vision for the future, construct a viable path to it and inspire others to follow.

There is a rational element to crisis leadership that involves making timely decisions and managing the actions of others. However, what sets effective Crisis Leaders apart is their ability to be authentic whilst making their own difficult judgement calls under stress. Charisma, vision, strategic thinking and emotional intelligence are the 21st century Crisis Leaders best weapons.

None of these can be taught – but all can be coached.

The Business Resilience Company works with individuals and teams from a wide variety of industries to prepare them to become effective Crisis Leaders.

If you would like to learn more then please contact us to discuss your requirements.

²⁰ Judge, T. et al. (2002). *Personality and Leadership*. Journal of Applied Psychology, 87, 765-780.

²¹ James, E. H., Wooten, L. P., & Dushek, K. (2011). *Crisis management: Informing a new leadership*

research agenda. Academy of Management Annals, 5(1), 455-493.

²² Fein, A. H., & Isaacson, N. S. (2009). *Echoes of Columbine: The emotion work of leaders in school shooting sites*. American behavioral scientist, 52(9), 1327-1346.