

LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING IN A PANDEMIC CRISIS

Effective leadership is a crucial ingredient of success for any organization at any time.¹ Under extreme circumstances, leadership becomes even more important, as lives, property and/or financial resources may be saved or lost primarily as a result of a leader's decision, or a failure to decide. Leaders are often required to make decisions quickly based on incomplete information, a high degree of uncertainty and rapidly changing conditions. In a crisis, leaders frequently make use of strict, command and control structures with hierarchical decision-making to ensure everyone responding is working from the same plan. At the same time, success also requires a more horizontal network of information sharing and up to the minute reporting on what response are working and which ones are not. Relying on experience is important but so is flexibility in the sense that each crisis may be different from similar events in the past.²

We find that effective leadership in a crisis is unique from leadership in normal circumstances. Steps taken immediately during the crisis contributes to better outcomes. In a crisis, leaders should first seek to establish networks of communication with all stakeholders involved in the crisis. This is done through voice, video, and data. Messages given by public officials and organization executives should start with *crisis empathy* that recognizes and articulates what people are feeling. Then it describes the current situation and what is being done to manage and mitigate the incident. The message must be truthful, empathetic and updated when things change to form a bond of trust between crisis leaders and the public.

Videos are powerful tools to get messages across, such as showing empty restaurants and streets reinforces the message of social distancing. By leveraging the internet, crisis leaders connect people to critical data and each other. The public needs correct and easily understandable information on websites that can be accessed when needed. Crisis leaders must also remove information silos, so government officials, first responders, health care providers, and scientists share information. Data such as tracking the virus is crucial to incident management and contributes to better situational awareness among stakeholders.

Second, leaders should seek to establish a collaborative decision-making process with other organizations responding to the crisis. Cross-sector collaboration is a key component of crisis leadership. Mayors, Governors and Federal Officials must talk to each other to understand each other's concerns. These officials must also talk regularly to their frontline hospital workers and first responders to get a sense of what government support is needed to maintain services. Crisis leaders should conduct a daily phone or video conference calls among operational and political executives to better understand the challenges of a rapidly evolving event.

¹ For a more comprehensive analysis of leadership, see Steven Cohen and William Eimicke, **Management Fundamentals**, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020, chapter 2.

² Joseph W. Pfeifer, "Crisis Leadership the Art of Adapting to Extreme Events," **Harvard Kennedy School Program on Crisis Leadership PCL Discussion Paper Series**, March 2013.

Collaboration is about more than exchanging ideas. It is about critical decision-making for containment and mitigation of COVID-19. The public and private sectors need to discuss management issues and develop innovative solutions to solve novel problems. Without collaboration, decision-making is limited to narrowly focused viewpoints.

Third, leaders should coordinate their organization's response with others responding, to match various experts available from the entire response team to the challenges of the crisis. And, fourth, leaders should seek to establish a unified command structure to effectively manage the crisis.³ When crisis leaders get others to connect and collaborate, they set the stage for coordination to take place. With any crisis, there is a dynamic coordination progression that starts with groups self-organizing and then aligning core efforts. Crisis leadership is about getting these groups to more quickly leverage each other's core competencies to produce desired outcomes. With the Coronavirus, we need to coordinate testing, surge capacity of hospitals, police, fire, and EMS, not to mention the supply chain of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other medical supplies.

After exercising these leadership principles, crisis leaders must persuade others to collectively manage the incident. This is done by creating a network framework across sectors for **Command and Control** that focuses on management processes and outcomes. Each hospital needs its management system to connect, collaborates and coordinates with local, regional and national management systems. These individual and central nodes, connect to suppliers for equipment, collaborate with the scientific community on testing results and coordinate surge capacity across health care providers.

The manner in which a leader behaves during a crisis is also important. During a crisis, leaders should maximize their visibility. Visibility communicates concern, attention, courage, and control. Leaders should reassure subordinates and all those involved and affected by the crisis. As Franklyn Delano Roosevelt famously said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." While that may not always be true, leaders must communicate that they are commanding the plan and resources necessary to overcome and get through the crisis.

Leaders should communicate constantly during a crisis. Communication is essential to creating effective networks, collaboration, coordination, and effective management. Constant communication can also overcome irrational fear and dispel unfounded rumors of nonexistent threats and calamities.

Leaders must also act as soon as is prudent, focused on restoring normalcy as quickly as possible. Once the immediate threats of the crisis are subdued, leaders should initiate what is often a long process of restoration and creation of prevention protocols against future potential crises. Sharing credit for the successful resolution and leaving a record behind for the future can also be added to the crisis leadership to-do list.⁴

³ Pfeifer, page 20.

⁴ Doris Kearns Goodwin, pp. 270-272.

Doris Kearns Goodwin has observed that Lincoln advocated for emancipation using both transactional and transformational methods, that is “what’s in it for me,” and “how can doing the right thing help us all get through the crisis”.⁵ We need to emphasize that everyone wins when we share information and resources.

In sum, crisis leaders coordinate collaborative-competition to rapidly identify collective solutions to complex problems. Extreme events like 9/11 and the Coronavirus throws us into a state of global trauma. Collectively, we experience worldwide anxiety about the future and turn to crisis leaders to lessen this fear of uncertainty. As we observe our nation’s leadership during the COVID-19 crisis to date, leaders such as director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Dr. Anthony Fauci, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer have been models of effective leadership during an extreme crisis.

We learned from 9/11, that crisis leadership is the art of getting others to connect, collaborate and coordinate by forming a network system to manage the forces of a crisis. These principles of crisis leadership also apply to the COVID-19 crisis. As we build a networked system for the COVID-19 crisis we begin to develop innovative ways to manage the incident, such as digital health care to reduce the number of patients in hospitals. Crisis leadership is vital to maintaining confidence in government and getting others to adapt to extreme events. This will become more apparent as we move from the containment phase of stopping the viral spread, to more of the mitigation phase of treating many patients.

Joseph Pfeifer is the Director for Crisis Leadership at Columbia University’s National Center for Disaster Preparedness and a Senior Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School for programs on Crisis Leadership. He is retired from FDNY as the Chief of Counterterrorism & Emergency Preparedness and was the first chief on 9/11 and assisted in managing the Ebola Crisis.

Dr. William B. Eimicke is Professor of Practice and Director of the Picker Center for Executive Education at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University. He retired from the FDNY as Deputy Commissioner for Strategic Planning and Performance Management and served with Chief Pfeifer during the H1N1 outbreak in New York City.

Dr. Steven Cohen is the Senior Vice Dean of Columbia University’s School of Professional Studies and Professor in the Practice of Public Affairs at Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs. He previously served as Executive Director of Columbia’s Earth Institute and has written numerous books and articles on leadership and management.

⁵ Doris Kearns Goodwin, **Leadership in Turbulent Times**, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018, pp. 234-236.