

Leading in Crises:

Observations on the Political and Decision-Making Dimensions of Response

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Emergency response organizations, as we have argued in earlier writing, must deal with both “routine emergencies” (dangerous events, perhaps extremely severe, that are *routine* because they can be anticipated and prepared for) and “true crises” (which, because of significant *novelty*, cannot be dealt with exclusively by pre-determined emergency plans and capabilities). These types of emergencies therefore require emergency response organizations to adopt very different leadership strategies, if they are effectively to cope with the differential demands of these events.^{1, 2} In this paper, we develop further ideas about leadership under crisis conditions, concentrating on the political leadership and decision making functions that are thrust to the center of concern during such crisis events.

Leadership in Routine Emergencies and True Crises

While exercising leadership in “true crises” differs dramatically from leading in “routine emergencies,” the dominant mode of operation for virtually all emergency response organizations – whether in the civilian or defense sector – is likely to be for “routine emergencies.” These organizations have been developed mainly to mobilize for and contend

¹ For further elaboration on the different types of leadership required for routine emergencies and true crises, see: Herman B. Leonard. 2004. Leadership in Crisis Situations. In J.M. Burns, G.R. Goethals, and G J. Sorenson (eds.). *The Encyclopedia of Leadership* (pp. 289-295.) Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing; Herman B. Leonard and Arnold M. Howitt. 2007. Against Desperate Peril: High Performance in Emergency Preparation and Response. In D.E. Gibbons (ed.), *Communicable Crises: Prevention, Response, and Recovery in the Global Arena* (pp. 1-25). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publications; and Arnold M. Howitt and Herman B. Leonard, *Managing Crises: Responses to Large Scale Emergencies*. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2009.

² These terms correspond roughly but not precisely with the terms “crises-as-usual” and “mega-crises” used in this book.

with recurring (or potentially recurring) events that can harm society. These may be natural disasters, infectious diseases, technology failures, terrorism, or acts of war. We call such emergencies “routine” here not because they are small (they may indeed threaten very severe loss of lives, property, and quality of life), but because society can anticipate their general type, features, and consequences. In the United States, Florida regularly experiences major hurricanes, California fights massive wildland fires, the Midwest is plagued by large-scale flooding, and the country as a whole is afflicted by seasonal influenza which annually causes upwards of 35,000 deaths.

Because society can *anticipate*, it can *prepare*. It reduces loss from these emergencies by contingency planning, creating specialized organizations, assembling and training people, procuring and deploying useful resources, practicing through discussion-based and live-action drills, and applying lessons derived from real experience to the next round of preparation. Developing the capacity and skill to deal with routine emergencies is a substantial and necessary achievement to protect what we hold dear. Hurricane response plans, professional forest fire services, flood control teams, and medical preventive and response capabilities represent a huge societal advance from having to respond to anticipatable emergencies with ad hoc actions that have not been tried and perfected in order to cope with previous challenges of the same type.

More rarely but quite importantly, however, emergency response organizations must confront challenges that dramatically confound expectations and plans. These situations are differentiated by major dimensions of *novelty* – in the form of threats never before seen (at least by the jurisdiction experiencing them), response demands that vastly exceed the scale of readily available response capacity, or familiar emergencies presenting in unprecedented combinations or complexity. SARS was a new infectious disease that resembled but behaved quite differently from the routine respiratory infections with which China and other nations were familiar; the levee ruptures and catastrophic flooding of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina presented a scale of demand for rescue, shelter, and evacuation for which the United States was unprepared; and the Asian tsunami in 2004 and the earthquake in Haiti in

2009 produced humanitarian relief challenges for which the world's governments and NGOs were not prepared. We term these very severe threats "true crises" to call attention to the fact that the strategies and resources we have prepared for responding to routine emergencies may prove inappropriate, grossly inadequate, or even counterproductive in managing these situations. Hence, different modes of preparation, organization, and leadership are needed to cope with these unprecedented demands.

Both modes of emergency action are essential. Robust response to routine emergencies is crucial because these threats recur more or less frequently and can produce widespread, even dire, losses. Proven, effective methods of dealing with these emergencies can dramatically reduce the potential losses. But in true crises, because of novel demands, response organizations need to *adapt* swiftly. They necessarily must depart from prepared tactics and reactions ingrained by past experience – by combining discrete capabilities in new patterns or improvising responses as the unanticipated conditions dictate.

Response organizations must thus learn to operate in *both* modes effectively: in routine emergencies reaping the benefits in effectiveness, efficiency, and safety that well-honed response can provide; while in crises being able, first, to recognize the appearance of novelty that may invalidate ordinary tactics and then flexibly moving to invent and implement innovative responses. In the earlier publications cited in footnote 1, we have emphasized the *differing leadership practices* that enable emergency response organizations to function in these two modes, a perspective that we summarize here.

Effective leadership "in the moment" of routine emergencies is importantly rooted in expertise and authority. Training and rich, professional experience inform strategic approaches and shape decisions; they also inspire followers' confidence and trust. Such leadership is authority-based, too. At the highest levels, leaders set goals and strategies, allocate resources, though often leaving discretion in implementation to operational leaders; closer to the action, leaders tend to be more directive. They infrequently implement plans exactly as written; but plans, preparation, and practice allow the leaders of response organizations to aim for a

precision of execution that increases effectiveness and protects bystanders and responders alike.

How do the leadership demands of true crises differ? Under tumultuous conditions in response to the novelty of a situation that was not anticipated and prepared for in advance, effective crisis leaders must orchestrate a process of substantial strategic and operational *adaptation*. By definition, they don't have a prepared script for dealing with it. By necessity, the form of leadership required to cope effectively with these circumstances will differ from the norm – emphasizing wide consultation, greater collaboration, structured improvisation, invention, more creative option development, and slower, more deliberative decision-making.³ Coping with true crises is about ingenuity, improvisation, invention, and creativity under pressure and in the presence of fear – rather than a matter of triggering practiced routines, applying previously determined answers or rules, or looking for a technical fix.

Lack of Comprehensive Expertise in the Face of Novelty: The presence of significant novelty means that no one is truly expert in terms of comprehensive training, planning, or experience. Though the expertise of many people may be helpful, it may not be immediately obvious what skills and knowledge are needed – and some may overestimate the degree to which their expertise is relevant and comprehensive. As the situation slowly clarifies or continues to evolve, leaders must be prepared to reach out more broadly than usual – perhaps repeatedly and beyond the boundaries of the response organization – to draw in people with relevant perspectives and experience. Some of the affected stakeholders may be in the leader's own organization, while others may be operating in sister organizations in the same jurisdiction or in organizations from other jurisdictions, levels of government, sectors (public or non-governmental), or even nations.

³ For discussions on organizational improvisation and creativity, see, for example: Frank J. Barrettt. 2008. Coda. Creativity and improvisation in jazz and organizations: Implications for organizational learning. *Organization Science* 9 (5), 605-622; David Mendonca, Giampiero E.G. Beroggi, and William A. Wallace. 2001. Decision support for improvisation during emergency response operations. *International Journal of Emergency Management* 1 (1), 30-39; and Karl E. Weick. 1998. Introductory essay: Improvisation as a mindset for organizational analysis. *Organization Science* 9 (5), 543-555

The first critical operational challenges of crisis management is developing -- and then maintaining – “situational awareness” as the circumstances evolve.⁴ Being “situationally aware” means to having an understanding of the key features of a given set of circumstances. In ordinary circumstances and in routine emergencies, this is generally relatively straightforward – for example, pilots know what key facts (location, weather, airspeed, nearby terrain features, ...) to monitor;⁵ fire fighters know what key dimensions of a house fire (whether people are inside the structure, scope and degree of involvement of the fire, presence of hazardous materials, ...) they need to assess before forming a battle plan. In unprecedented circumstances, by contrast, establishing situational awareness is much more difficult – since we don’t fully understand the situation, we don’t necessarily even know what the most important features of it are or what set of facts will permit us to have a reasonably clear and comprehensive picture of what we are dealing with. Moreover, we may not have methods for collecting data about those elements that we can identify as relevant. And, finally, as the crisis evolves, the list of key features may change.

Effective leaders in crisis situations therefore put significant effort and emphasis on developing and re-developing situational awareness – that is, they create a process for figuring out what the relevant features are and collecting data about them. They also recognize that those features may change, and they arrange for periodic re-examination of the situational landscape to search for new elements (either new or formerly unnoticed aspects of the events, or consequences of the events).

⁴ For further discussion on the criticality of good situational awareness during crises, see: Arnold M. Howitt and Herman B. Leonard. 2006. Beyond Katrina: Improving disaster response capabilities. *Center for Public Leadership Working Papers*, Spring, 18-25; and Howitt and Leonard, *Managing Crises: Response to Large Scale Emergencies* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2009).

⁵ In fact, situational awareness emerged as an important component of effective crisis management largely through its prominence in Crew Resource Management (CRM) training, a process for improving flight safety that emerged in the late 1970s. Since then, a number of different organizations, spanning various sectors and industries, have adopted CRM and its core principles as part of efforts to improve decision-making processes and crisis management capabilities. For more on CRM, see: Robert L. Helmreich, Ashleigh C. Merritt, and John A. Wilhelm. 1999. The evolution of Crew Resource Management training in commercial aviation. *International Journal of Aviation Psychology* 9 (1), 19-32; Federal Aviation Administration, US Department of Transportation. 2004. *Advisory Circular: Crew Resource Management Training*. Available online at: [http://rgl.faa.gov/REGULATORY_AND_GUIDANCE_LIBRARY/REGADVISORYCIRCULAR.NSF/0/80038cf51aace53686256e24005cbb23/\\$FILE/AC120-51e.pdf](http://rgl.faa.gov/REGULATORY_AND_GUIDANCE_LIBRARY/REGADVISORYCIRCULAR.NSF/0/80038cf51aace53686256e24005cbb23/$FILE/AC120-51e.pdf) [Accessed May 6, 2009.]

Coping effectively with novel circumstances is about ingenuity, invention, and creativity – not about providing previously determined answers or complying with previously established rules. Facing unfamiliar, unprecedented, novel circumstances, organizations have no choice but to invent their new approach – by definition, there is no script to follow. They must, in effect, improvise – they will need to produce systematic creativity and ingenuity. They are likely to do this better if they have a methodical process to generate and analyze a broader range of options. One useful element of such a process is to develop a set of promising options and then ask, “suppose we couldn’t use any of these – then what would we do?” This forces the development of the “best alternative to the current option,” and thus systematically expands the “decision space” available to leaders. Often, this will be carried out more effectively if a broader range of *people* are invited into the idea-generation and vetting process. In the face of unprecedented circumstances, leaders need to share the challenging process of invention with (many) others. Their most effective role is to orchestrate that process – not to try to be a one-person substitute for it.

Organizational and Community Leadership in the Face of Crisis

Because the time frame of a true crisis may extend beyond the norm for routine emergencies, leaders must be prepared for challenges that go beyond the boundaries of dealing with a routine emergency. It is far more likely therefore that leadership in crisis will prominently bring to the fore *both* professional response leaders -- the people most often in the lead in managing routine emergencies by virtue of their experience and technical skills -- *and* political leaders -- the individuals chosen by an organization or community to make broader decisions about values and allocation of resources and to provide by example and suasion guidance about how to behave and feel in the face of the new demands that crises bring. This section discusses some of the political challenges that crises evoke.

Effective crisis leaders orchestrate a process of adaptation, not a search for technical “fixes.”⁶

In novel circumstances, the challenges are not likely to be subject to simple technical fixes that can be discovered and implemented – rather, they are likely to require adaptation to new and at least partially unwelcome realities. This is at least as much an emotional and political process as it is a cognitive, technical or engineering process. It is stressful for all, and individuals and groups sometimes engage in various devices to avoid the stress – going into denial, assuming it is someone else’s job to work on it, blaming or attacking the leader. The job of organizational leaders is to help orchestrate a process of collective learning about and adapting to new realities, some of which will inevitably be painful.

Adaptation to novel challenges, because it allocates loss and gain, is inherently political and should be managed as such. In large, complex organizations or communities, the process of adaptation to unwelcome realities is also likely to be highly political. Different subgroups will have different perceptions as well as different interests. The leadership challenge thus includes not only finding new paths and approaches, but in getting different parts of the organization to have reasonably consistent perceptions and to accept a set of general organizational priorities – and, thus, to set aside some of their own narrower but cherished priorities. It is thus fundamentally a process of coalition-building – politics by another name.

As crises evolve, there are frequently additional negative surprises. Negative situations have a way of causing or allowing bad news to surface. Stress exposes existing underlying weaknesses, some of which have been known (by others) and finessed for years in better times. Crises sometimes reveal these weaknesses directly – and, sometimes, people find crises a convenient time to allow others to discover weaknesses they have long known about (hoping, perhaps, that the revelation will be swept up with other bad news and therefore less noticed). This is a normal and natural feature of events like these – and leaders need to expect and be prepared for it.

⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz explores the idea of adaptive leadership at length in *Leadership without Easy Answers* (1994, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.)

Grief is inevitably a part of adaptation to novel challenges; the most effective leaders acknowledge this, and allow and help people to grieve. This process often encounters or unleashes strong emotional reactions. All major changes bring losses as well as gains, and, inevitably, crisis circumstances (which lead with the negative) will imply some real and significant losses. People are often deeply frightened – frightened of the loss of a past they knew, and frightened of the uncertain future they now face. With loss comes grief, pain and suffering, as much in the professional sphere of life as in any other domain. We almost never discuss the role of leaders in helping organizations to grieve their losses – but, as in other parts of people’s lives, we cannot truly move on until we have grieved for what is gone. Some organizations invent new rituals, or use existing ritual forms of helping people own, own up to, and cope with their losses. Religious authorities may be able to suggest processes that could be helpful here; they have training and a great deal of experience in helping people to grieve in functional ways. Explicitly opening up (psychological) space for grieving may be important in helping people have the energy to let go of what they have lost and to move forward.⁷

Crisis situations often (but not always) bring out the very best in people. Especially in the early stages of a crisis, many will rise to the occasion in surprising and inspiring ways -- showing creativity and ingenuity; optimism; a willingness to work hard and to make difficult choices and to accept sacrifices; an ability to set personal and narrow institutional interests aside in favor of the larger interests of the organization as a whole; and the capacity to lead and inspire others. Crisis leaders need to seek, identify, support, and rely upon them. Others, by contrast, will find the stress and uncertainty debilitating, and will not be able to be their best selves.⁸

Leaders need to avoid being put into the role of “answer-giver in chief.” In a non-routine setting, trying to carry out the traditional image of authority-driven, “knowing and telling” leadership is a trap for both the leaders and the followers. Trying to provide answers will only

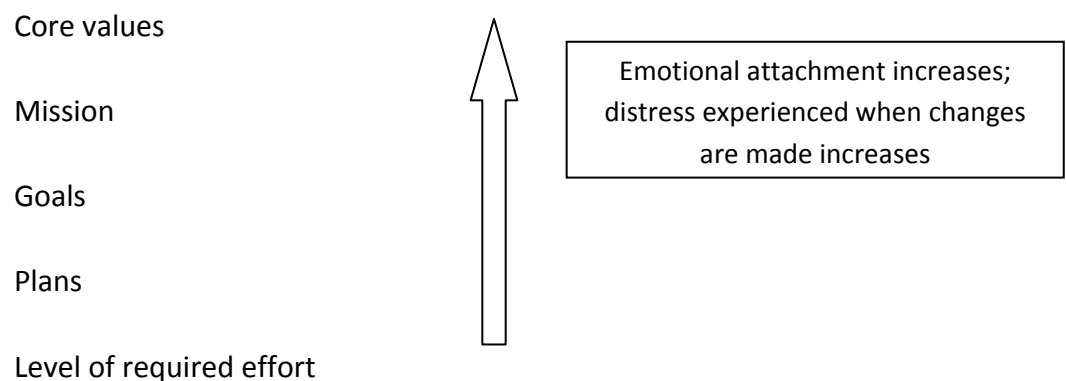
⁷ The Harvard Kennedy School case *Rudy Giuliani: The Man and His Moment* (Hannah Riley and Taija Smith. 2003. CR15-03-1681.0. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School) illustrates how a leader can help people and organizations navigate loss and suffering during traumatic events.

⁸ Although crises and disasters may at times instigate panic, a number of scholars have determined that such events often prompt positive and pro-social behavior. For an overview of this literature, see: Enrico L. Quarantelli. 1988. *Lessons Learned from Research on Disasters*. Newark, DE: Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware.

bring an even larger and more unfair and unrealistic burden on institutional leaders. Thus, when facing circumstances that are largely to entirely unprecedented, no one should expect the organization's leadership team to have ready answers about what to do, or about what the end-state will look like.

People may, however, when they are not being their best selves, *behave* as if they want their leaders to have (or expect them to have) all of the answers. There are many reasons why they may do this, but prime among them is probably that it accords with popular images of how leaders behave in emergency situations. In *routine* emergencies, this is indeed a reasonable and valuable image of leadership, and it is the fundamental command and control, authority-driven form of leadership that enables high performance in emergency organizations (like fire departments and hospital emergency rooms). But when the circumstances we are facing are anything but routine, having leaders try to play that role is a potentially fatal trap – for them and for their organizations.⁹

Instead of trying to provide answers, effective crisis leaders seek to reaffirm and (re)define core institutional values. Leadership in troubled times is defined by the values it preserves, not by the ability to get all the operational decisions right. There is a hierarchy of commitments in an organization, with core organizational values at the top:



⁹ See: Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers*.

As we move up this hierarchy, the level of personal and organizational emotional commitment rises, and the associated pain and distress from making changes rises as well. We vary the necessary level of effort constantly, change plans reasonably frequently, and adjust goals on occasion. Less commonly, and with more angst, we redefine the mission. But we tend to hold onto the core values tightly, and many find it frightening to see them challenged or altered.

In crisis situations, effective leaders focus on values and priorities. People will follow, make great efforts, and willingly undertake sacrifices when they see leaders working consistently to preserve and protect values that they deeply care about and believe in. Leaders should therefore speak to the values – consistently, repeatedly, and forcefully. They view a crisis situation as a unique opportunity to (re)define and project the true core values of the institution – as they prefer them to be understood. They recognize that our values are not what we say they are – they are what we actually live by. In good times, it is easy to stand by a range of commitments and values; in troubled times, we find out what an organization really cares about, precisely because not everything can be preserved – so we come to discover what we keep (and thereby show to be essential) and what we discard (and thereby show to be dispensable).

Effective leaders model behaviors that affirm the values and priorities they are asking the community to uphold.¹⁰ In the actions and choices that they visibly make during a crisis, leaders should behave in ways that the community will recognize as consistent with the values and priorities that they have rhetorically proposed as the basis for crisis response. This goes farther than “walking the walk, not just talking the talk” in order to head off cynicism. Modeling behavior translates abstract principles into concrete actions and thus effectively reinforces commitment and encourages members of the community to take similar actions.

Leadership in times of trouble requires providing authentic hope and confidence. Confidence, hope, and reasonable optimism are key assets in uncertain times; they help people be their

¹⁰ One example of this form of leadership is the “follow me” or the “leadership-by-example” doctrine of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). For more on the IDF’s use of “follow me” leadership see: Reuven Gal. 1986. *A Portrait of the Israeli Soldier*. New York, NY: Greenwood Press; Frank K. Sobchak. 1993. ‘Ah Harey’ – follow me – origins of the Israeli junior leadership doctrine. *Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin* 19 (4), 20-23;

better selves – to be more resilient and more creative. The first foundation of hope and confidence is a *consistent commitment to strong institutional values*. Seeing their key values reconfirmed (or compellingly adapted) in uncertain times provides people with a needed anchor – whatever else may happen, we are going to work to preserve the key things that we have always cared about. Unprecedented troubled times can make people uncertain about everything – and hearing their core values reaffirmed provides something that they can count on. (This is one of the reasons why leaders in crisis situations need to put such emphasis on core values.)

The second basis for hope and confidence is a *capacity for creative adaptability*. Why should people believe that things are going to be OK? Not because we already have an answer, because we generally don't. Not because our current plan is bound to succeed – because it may well not. Rather, we should put our faith in our ***capacity for adaptation, resilience, and ingenuity*** – and remember that our existing accumulated resources (people, knowledge, physical and financial resources) allow us the luxury of time to assess, invent, and transition to our new strategic position.

Making Decisions in Unprecedented Circumstances

A key task of leaders in difficult circumstances is making decisions. One important part of effective leadership in true crises can be thought of as *a good enough decision, soon enough to matter, communicated well enough to be understood, carried out well enough to work*.¹¹ Although this standard wouldn't be sufficient in normal times or even during routine emergencies, it frequently strikes the appropriate balance between the urgency of the moment and the difficulties of making and carrying out decisions during an unprecedented tumult of events. What decision-making processes and approaches are most likely to help achieve that outcome?

Effective leaders in crisis situations often deliberately slow the process down, waiting to decide until the time is right. In dealing with unprecedented circumstances, we intrinsically

¹¹ See also: Herman B. Leonard and Arnold M. Howitt. 2004. The heat of the moment. *Compass* 2 (1), 19-23.

know less about the “events-consequences” landscape than we are used to knowing or would like to know. Because we know less about what is going on, and less about what will happen in response to various actions we might take or options we might pursue, it will take longer to develop enough understanding of the situation to make good, reliable decisions. Leaders need to resist the impulse to think of uncertainty as the same thing as urgency. Although some situations require immediate decisions, a leader, as we suggest below, should deliberately weigh the advantages and disadvantages of immediate choice against those of delay.

Effective leaders decide when they believe the decision is ready – not when people ask for it.

In uncertain circumstances, everything feels more urgent. It is difficult to resist the impulse to make decisions when they are presented. Our images of leaders are constructed around the “superhero” idea that true leaders will know what to do and will make rapid, wise decisions. People may unconsciously project that image onto their leaders – and, sometimes, leaders also do so themselves. When leaders act in a way contrary to this expectation, people (and the leaders themselves) may wonder if perhaps they are not up to the task. Effective leaders in crisis situations resist the seduction of deciding just because people are asking for and expecting a decision -- and instead decide when the decision is ready.

Sometimes, the best thing to do is to wait, and see how the situation evolves, and seek more and better options. Leaders need to take the time to define and explore the new circumstances – on a number of important dimensions, there will be significant differences from our past experience. Often, when things go badly, it is clear in retrospect that not enough time was taken to develop a full suite of options, and that, if people had taken a bit more time, it is likely that they would have been able to identify significantly better options. For example, the U.S. Army trains battlefield commanders that they should generally not make a decision until they have developed at least three options, *all of which they could reasonably expect to be successful – i.e.*, not to create straw men to counterbalance a single preferred outcome. The point of this rule is to force commanders to expand their “decision space” because in situations that feel urgent people often too quickly grasp at the first reasonable option that presents itself. Forcing the development and examination of multiple options implies that the chosen

option had to beat at least two others – which is likely to make it better than the first option that was thought of.

Slowing down doesn't mean disengaging. Leaders let others know they are engaged, even if they aren't ready to decide yet. The fact that a leader is not ready to decide yet should not be allowed to suggest to others that he or she is disengaged, not paying attention, overwhelmed, or not concerned. Leaders can identify the uncertainties that need to be clarified before a decision can be made, and ask for help in resolving them – and point out that in some cases we will simply need to wait and see how events evolve.

Consult. This is part of slowing down and part of signaling full engagement. Leaders need to talk, think, and deliberate with their followers. This has many virtues, among which are:

- **The leader may learn something** (substantive or about desirable process);
- **The leader will *certainly* learn about how others are feeling** about things – e.g., whether they are ready for a decision, whether there is a high level of conflict between different factions or groups, which may help them figure out whether it is time to decide, or whether more work needs to be done before a decision will be widely accepted;
- **Others may learn** that there are (sensible, respectable) people who have a different view from theirs -- and may thus become more tolerant or accepting of alternative views (or, less frequently, be convinced to change their own views to a more widely held collective view);
- **Others have time during the deliberation process to get used to the fact that the decision may not go their way**, and to pre-adapt to it, reducing the amount of time needed after the decision to adapt to the new reality it constitutes.

One of Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton's observations about leading through an extended period of difficulties is that you only have (lengthy) discussions when not everyone agrees – in which case, you will always eventually have bad news for at least some of the members of the

group – and, when you have bad news for people, ***never let it be a surprise***. Give them the time reasonably available to adjust to the decision and to the new circumstances it will bring.¹²

Leaders make decisions when they believe they have reached the point where either: (a) they aren't likely to learn significantly more about the situation or develop significantly better options by waiting; or (b) options that look like they may be the best available are declining in expected value or are expiring altogether. In uncertain situations, it is often very difficult to tell when this point has been reached. One useful technique is for leaders to pose these two questions (to themselves and to others):

- (1) How much more are we likely to learn about this issue if we wait – and how long are we likely to have to wait before we know more?
- (2) Are the options currently available to us waning in value as we wait, or disappearing – and, if so, how fast?

Leaders understand and expect that different advisors, with different backgrounds, perspectives, and roles, will give them conflicting advice. Indeed, that is one of the virtues of having different advisors. Cyrus the Great formulated a central rule of crisis management: “diversity in counsel, unity in command.”¹³ To help protect against narrow individual perspectives (“tunnel vision,” a common stress response), effective leaders expand their and their organization’s intellectual bandwidth by arranging to hear from a variety of advisors. A natural consequence is that they will generally receive conflicting advice. The value of this

¹² Among other transitions, Shackleton faced the challenge of getting people to get off a ship that had once been their principal basis of confidence in their continued safety but which was now being crushed by ice – onto a frozen wasteland of pack ice ... and to feel that their new circumstances (standing on ice five feet thick over 11,000 feet of water 100 miles from land with three small lifeboats and diminishing food stores) constituted a sufficient basis for optimism and hope. He did this, in part, by getting people used to this idea gradually – and by being inveterately optimistic. For a detailed examination of Shackleton’s Antarctic expedition, see: Nancy F. Koehn, Erica Helms, and Phillip Mead. 2003. *Leadership in Crisis: Ernest Shackleton and the Epic Voyage of the Endurance*. Harvard Business School Case 9-803-127. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School.

¹³ Many of the maxims and quotations attributed to Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire, originate in (or are derived from) the ancient Athenian scholar Xenophon’s epic work *The Education of Cyrus*. Although Xenophon’s account should not be read as historical biography, it functions as an important illustration of the art and principles of effective leadership. For modern translations of Xenophon’s work, see: Xenophon. 2001. *The Education of Cyrus*, trans. and ed. by Wayne Ambler. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Xenophon. 2006. *Xenophon’s Cyrus the Great: The Arts of Leadership and War*, trans. and ed. by Larry Hedrick. New York NY: St. Martin’s Press.

device is not that it will necessarily make the right choice clear – it is that it will help the leaders to have more complete data and a wider option set from which to make a better decision.

To compound the leader’s challenge, some advisors (generally, the professional “operational” people) will systematically feel greater urgency, and press for a rapid decision, while others (commonly, staff members not directly involved in operations) will take a more analytical stance, wanting more data and investigation before a decision is reached. Leaders themselves may also have a personal bias in one direction or the other. Effective leaders try to be aware of their own and their advisors’ biases – and “counterprogram” ... that is, push back against the biases and try to determine whether the time is really right to decide and move on, or whether instead it is the biases that are making it seem so.

Leaders need to be aware of other cognitive biases as well – their own and others’ – and deliberately push back against them.¹⁴ Cognitive biases are patterns of thought that tend to take us consistently in particular directions. Mostly, they come from our past *successful* experiences – that is, we develop these habits and patterns of thought in circumstances when they were helping us. Having become habits, though, they now carry us along whether or not they are appropriate to the current situation. This is, plainly, a greater risk when we are facing unusual or novel circumstances – because our habits were developed and honed and tested in ordinary times, and may be out of place in the novel environment we now find ourselves in.

There are many cognitive biases. Some are common across most people and institutions; others are specific to particular individuals, groups, or organizations. (For example, engineers and lawyers and doctors tend to look at the same situation and see very different things; they each have professional cognitive biases.) Here are four common biases that are, in ordinary times, often a help, but which, in novel circumstances, can be misleading us:

(a) **(Over)confidence** in our ability to foresee the future;

¹⁴ See, for example: Max Bazerman and Don Moore. 2008. *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, 7th ed. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons.

- (b) A tendency **not to observe evidence that is inconsistent with our current theory or** approach;
- (c) A tendency, when we do notice “disconfirming evidence,” **to escalate commitment to the *current* strategy** (rather than to conclude that it needs to be revisited, re-examined, or modified); and
- (d) A tendency, when things are not going well, **to have the issues become personal.**

Leaders need to be aware of their own biases as well as the biases of those around them – and when their inclination is to proceed in a way that is consistent with these bias(es), they should take care to “check the arithmetic” to make sure that they are not just being carried along by one or more of these systematic cognitive biases.

Many leaders and organizations find it valuable to assemble and utilize a “Team B.” “Team B” is the name used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for a device they use to help them think and invent their way through novel emergency events.¹⁵ Various other organizations have used devices like this, and a number of different forms might be useful. In general, the idea is to assemble a group of advisors who are *not* involved in the day-to-day response to the situation but who have relevant background, expertise, and independent judgment. Often, these groups include some people from inside the organization and some from outside. The members of Team B, in turn, may reach out to tap the knowledge and insights of an even wider group of outsiders. Their task is to help the organization see or think of things that it might have missed and, more generally, to expand its cognitive bandwidth (helping it to avoid “tunnel vision,” a common stress reaction).

Commonly, Team B convenes periodically (for example, the Team B convened during the first SARS outbreak met by teleconference three times a week for an hour at a time), and transmits views and suggestions in some convenient form to the CEO. Often, the team is asked to reflect

¹⁵ For a detailed examination of CDC’s experience with developing its Team B program see: Pamela Varley. 2008. *Keeping an Open Mind in an Emergency: CDC Experiments with ‘Team B.’* Harvard Kennedy School Case C16-8-1895.0. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School. This approach has important similarities with the idea of a Rapid Reflection Force that has been pioneered by Electricite de France (EDF). [Add citation to Lagadec article here.](#)

about a few specific questions, but is also invited to identify anything else that it believes is important that might be underappreciated by the organization or by those principally responsible for developing the ongoing response to the unfolding events. One important feature of such a device is that it can significantly expand the range of views and expertise that can be drawn upon, as each of the members of Team B is her or himself embedded in an at least partially independent professional network. At a minimum, such a device can raise our confidence level that there is not something major that we have missed.

When the time comes to decide, it is essential to be decisive and clear. People and organizations need clear, “yes” or “no” decisions, particularly in stressful and uncertain times. Persistent ambiguity contributes to the sense of uncertainty. Leaders need to wait until the time is right to decide – but, when they have decided, they need to be clear and forceful.

When sacrifices are necessary, it is important to ask for them. When sacrifices are required, leaders need to ask for them directly – they should not assume that people will figure out what is required (or that it is required of them). People are more likely to make the sacrifice if it has been requested of them than if it feels like an ambush, or feels like no one is going to notice or value the effort.

“Never look down and never look back.”¹⁶ Looking far back – to our longer term history – may be helpful. We have weathered troubled times before, and can take inspiration from that. But, in the current rapidly evolving circumstances, there is little to be gained from going back over the ***recent*** past. First, it mostly isn’t terribly relevant, since we are likely to be facing continually changing circumstances rather than facing the same circumstances repeatedly. Second, looking at our recent history is likely to do little more than surface regrets, disputes, blame, and recrimination. Effective leaders don’t allow people to go there. All of the things that we can still change are in the future, and we can only change them by doing something in the present. Leaders stay focused on that – and don’t let people wallow in the immediate past.

¹⁶ This is sometimes referred to as the “ironworkers’ motto” – though we confess that we have never heard an ironworker say it, and we don’t know if they use it; but it does seem appropriate to their circumstances.

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