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Working together in crises

Herman B ‘Dutch’ Leonard and **Arnold M Howitt** examine the different kinds of leaders likely to deal with an emergency – political leaders and emergency response chiefs – saying that neither will have all the capabilities required, and that both groups need to work together

SEVERE NATURAL DISASTERS, large-scale industrial accidents or epidemics often expose emergency response organisations and society to previously unseen threats, response demands that exceed available resources, or familiar emergencies in unprecedented combinations or complex layers. Two kinds of leaders are likely to come to the fore: professional emergency response chiefs and political leaders.

By virtue of their experience, technical skills and expertise, response professionals usually take the lead in managing emergencies, with political leadership assuming a supporting, background role. But in crises without precedent or of massive scale, political leaders inevitably play a bigger part as new challenges appear, frequently over a much longer timeframe than in routine emergencies. Political leaders have the broad authority and legitimacy that come from being elected; they have been entrusted to make broader decisions about values, allocate resources, and to provide guidance by example and suasion.

While both sets of leaders probably share most values, they may set different priorities;

each is likely to care deeply about some things that the other finds less important. The relationship between response professionals and political leaders therefore can be fraught with tension and even overt conflict, especially if those involved have not previously established personal working relationships.

Extraordinary demands

Yet effective collaboration is essential if the extraordinary demands of crisis leadership are to be met. Neither response professionals nor political leaders are likely to have the full set of skills and standing with stakeholders that is required. Leaders need to find the right combination of technical means to deal with the situation. Simultaneously, they must rally people to deal with the emotional strains, maintain cohesive commitment to organisational or community goals, and sustain the effort to surmount the crisis and establish a coherent, viable post-crisis reality.

Effective crisis leaders orchestrate a process of adaptation, not a search for technical ‘fixes,’ as Ronald A Heifetz says when he explores the idea of adaptive leadership in

Leadership without Easy Answers. In novel circumstances, challenges are unlikely to be subject to simple technical means that can be easily discovered and implemented. They are likely to require adaptation to new and at least partially unwelcome realities. This is as much an emotional and political process as it is a cognitive, technical or engineering one. It is stressful for all; and some engage in various devices to avoid the stress – going into denial, assuming it is someone else’s job, blaming or attacking the leader. The role of leaders is to orchestrate a process of collective learning about, and adapting to, new realities, some of which will be painful.

Adaptation to novel challenges, because it allocates loss and gain, is inherently political and should be managed as such. Different subgroups will have different perceptions and interests. The leadership challenge thus includes not only charting new paths and approaches, but also getting different parts of the organisation to have reasonably consistent perceptions and to accept a set of general priorities – often by setting aside some of their own cherished priorities. Fundamentally, this is

Captain Chesley Sullenberger landed US Airways Flight 1549 safely on the Hudson River after a birdstrike damaged the aircraft’s engines. In the early stages of a crisis many people will rise to the occasion in inspiring ways

FDNY

coalition-building – politics by another name.

As crises evolve, there are frequently additional negative surprises; stress exposes existing underlying weaknesses, and crises often reveal these directly. Sometimes people consider a crisis a good time to allow others to discover problems they have long known about. Leaders need to expect and be prepared, both for the evolving crisis to generate further bad news, and for existing problems to become more visible.

Grief is inevitably a part of adaptation to novel challenges; the most effective leaders acknowledge this, allowing and helping people to grieve. All major changes bring losses as well as gains and crisis circumstances imply real and significant losses. With loss come grief, pain, and suffering. People are often deeply frightened by the loss of a past they knew and are frightened of the uncertain future. We almost never discuss the role of leaders in helping organisations to mourn – but we cannot truly move on until we have grieved for what is gone. Some organisations invent new rituals, or use existing ones. Religious authorities may be able to suggest helpful processes; they have the training and experience.

Explicitly opening up psychological space for mourning may help people find the energy to let go of what they have lost and to move forward. The Harvard Kennedy School case *Rudy Giuliani: The Man and his Moment* by Hannah Riley and Taija Smith, provides a good illustration of how a leader can help people and organisations to navigate loss and suffering during traumatic events.

In the early stages of a crisis in particular, many people will rise to the occasion in surprising and inspiring ways – showing creativity, ingenuity, optimism, a willingness to work hard, to make difficult choices and accept sacrifices, setting personal and narrow institutional interests aside in favour of the interests of the organisation as a whole, and the capacity to lead and inspire. Crisis leaders need to seek, identify, support and rely upon these individuals. Others will find the stress and uncertainty debilitating.

Leaders need to avoid being the ‘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 leaders and followers. Attempting to provide answers will only place an even larger, more unfair and unrealistic burden upon them. When facing unprecedented circumstances, no one should expect the organisation’s leadership team to have ready answers.

Under severe stress, people often behave as

Figure 1

Hierarchy of Organisational Commitments



As we move up the hierarchy, emotional attachment is still stronger. Thus, when dramatic change occurs, stress increases greatly

if they want their leaders to have all the answers, probably because this accords with popular images of how leaders behave in emergency situations. In routine emergencies, this is the fundamental command and control, authority-driven form of leadership that enables high performance. But when the circumstances involve unprecedented challenges, trying to play such a role is a potentially fatal trap – for leaders and their organisations.

Instead of trying to provide a full array of answers, effective crisis leaders reaffirm and (re)define core institutional values. Leadership in troubled times is defined as much by the values it preserves as by the ability to get operational decisions right.

Figure 1 illustrates the hierarchy of commitments in an organisation. As we move up this hierarchy, the level of personal and organisational emotional commitment rises, and the pain and distress from making changes increase. We vary the 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, and many find it frightening to see them challenged or altered.

In a crisis, effective leaders focus on values and priorities. People will make efforts and accept sacrifices when they see leaders working to preserve and protect values they believe in. Leaders should speak

A 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 leaders have an answer, because they generally don’t. Not because the current plan is bound to succeed – because it may not. People should put their faith in the community or organisation’s capacity for adaptation, resilience, and ingenuity – and remember that its existing accumulated resources (people, knowledge, physical and financial) allow it the luxury of time to assess, invent, and transition to a new strategic position.

Effective leaders behave in a way that affirms the values and priorities they are asking the community to uphold. One example of this form of leadership is the ‘follow-me’ or the ‘leadership by example’ doctrine of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), as outlined in *A Portrait of the Israeli Soldier* by Reuven Gal in 1986.

When leaders make choices or take visible actions during a crisis, they should behave in ways that the community will recognise as being consistent with the values and priorities that they have rhetorically proposed as the basis for crisis response. Such behaviour translates abstract principles into concrete actions, effectively reinforces commitment and encourages the community to take similar actions.

In conclusion, these crisis leadership tasks draw not only on the technical and managerial expertise of professional responders, but on

Confidence, hope and reasonable optimism are key assets in uncertain times; they help people to be more resilient and more creative

to these values – consistently, repeatedly and forcefully. They should see a crisis as a unique opportunity to (re)define and project the institution’s values – as they prefer them to be understood. In good times, it is easy to stand by a range of commitments and values; in troubled times, we find out what an organisation really cares about because we discover what is kept (and shown to be essential) and what is discarded (dispensable).

Leadership must provide hope and confidence. Along with reasonable optimism, these are key assets in uncertain times; they help people to be their better selves – to be more resilient and more creative. Seeing their key values confirmed (or compellingly adapted) in uncertain times provides people with an anchor – whatever else may happen, the community or the organisation is working to preserve the things that it has always cared about.

the skills and sensitivities of political leaders. Neither group is likely to have the full set of capabilities necessary to enable the community or organisation to be sufficiently adaptable and resilient to overcome crisis conditions. Recognition of the range of leadership tasks necessary under the conditions of a major, extended crisis is a crucial first step; but such stressful circumstances also require effective collaboration between the two groups. CRJ

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