

Crisis leadership versus leadership in crisis

Saul B. Wilen, MD

ABSTRACT

Effective leadership must already be in place when a crisis occurs. Leadership must be able to function during the crisis and effectively bring it to resolution so that recovery can begin and proceed as successfully as possible.

The existing challenges reinforce the need for leadership that can operate on multiple planes. Competence, planning, and problem-solving abilities form the basis for determining a leader's success. Innovation, decision making, a prevention orientation, risk taking, and risk management must all be part of the leadership skills package.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is assumed by an individual with the ability and the drive to lead, give guidance, and/or supply direction. The ability to lead encompasses the capacity to guide or direct a course of action, mold behavior and/or opinion, direct performance, inspire the conduct of others, and anticipate and envision future needs and concerns. Leadership styles can be culturally and morally neutral. For example, leadership can be effective even when the aim of the endeavor and its leader are corrupt or evil. Therefore, leadership derives its meaning from the context in which it is used.

The published literature, including books, articles, and scholarly journals, for the most part concentrates on everyday situations—improving productivity, a vision for the future, becoming more efficient in

a competitive world. A focus on leadership in crisis mode—when the unexpected occurs suddenly—is less frequently addressed. Little guidance is available about how to lead in dangerous or ambiguous situations; when there is an absence of necessary information, especially in the early stages; or when lives, property, and economic stability are immediately at stake.

The challenge is in the need to find better ways for selecting and training leaders, understanding what makes up leadership roles, creating effective responses to crises, and eliminating unnecessary repetition. Paramount in overcoming any existing challenge facing crisis leadership is the understanding that prevention is the best strategy. In the preparedness spectrum, preparedness to prevent must be equal in importance to preparedness to respond.

CRISIS LEADERSHIP: THE OPTIMAL SOLUTION, OR A RISK-TAKING STRATEGY?

In a crisis, time is the critical element. Therefore, a solution incorporating calculated risks that will work immediately is preferred over waiting for the optimal solution before acting. A profound historical example of the dangers of waiting for the optimal solution is that of General George McClellan, commander of the Union Army during the American Civil War (1861-1862). McClellan employed such overcautious tactics and would not engage the Confederate Army in significant battles. As a result, the Union Army was regularly defeated and in retreat.

President Abraham Lincoln finally relieved General McClellan from command. After a series of commanders, new leadership, ultimately under the command of General U.S. Grant, adopted an aggressive, risk-taking strategy, with the outcome being in favor of the Union.

Ongoing, strategic planning, with its multiple contingency or scenario components, helps bridge the gap between the need for crisis leadership and the goal of devising the optimal solution. It should be recognized that most plans are obsolete the moment they are written, and that no plan survives its first encounter with a crisis. This is the truth no matter how much work has gone into the plan's development. The basic reality is that no two crises are ever the same. Each crisis has its own unique characteristics. Invariably, something not considered in the plan design will occur early on and disrupt the plan's execution, requiring shifts in thinking and in the previously determined actions. Effective leadership needs to be in place when a crisis ensues, but as importantly, it must be prepared to bring about subsequent resolution and recovery with the minimum amount of disruption.

Management differs from leadership. Management is viewed as producing control, consistency, regulation, and efficiency. In the search for creative solutions, management, at times, will adopt new ideas as a sign of progress. These "ready to wear" managerial stock solutions discourage managers from dealing with the unexpected and prompt them to embrace a thinking process based on a "one size fits all" mentality. This approach actually serves as a creative disincentive when the one size produced turns out to be the size that fits no one.

Leadership is associated with change, vision, innovation, and risk taking. Leadership takes an idea from a plan to an ongoing planning process, moves its emphasis from static to dynamic, directs the engagement from diffuse to strategic, and shifts the paradigm from necessary to sufficient.

COMPETENCE

There should be a requirement, for those who find themselves in positions of leadership where crises are likely to occur, to have already established competence. This includes possessing the ability to perform consistently in a crisis. Demonstrating the necessary

range of skills and knowledge defines this competence. Leadership roles at strategic, tactical, or operational levels are different, though encompassing some similar functions. However, leadership accountable for direct crisis intervention also has unique responsibilities, including high-level decision-making potential and capacity.

Leadership intervention fosters change in the dynamics of interactions and influences the environment in which the interactions occur. Leadership gains from the power that is attributed to it because it encourages the perception of the leadership's ability to lead. There is a gain of actual power when the application of resources under changing conditions supports the ability to lead. Leadership and power are inseparable. Leaders' function is to avoid and avert disorganization and chaos. A single method of leadership is not, and cannot be, effective in all situations. Realistically, a leader understands that the methods employed must vary depending on the characteristics of the situation.

Effective leadership behavior is likely to be dependent on the leader's personality and skills and the competence and motivation of the team being led. Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery, a senior British military commander in World War II, stated, "The vital attributes of a leader are decision in action and calmness in crisis. Given these two attributes he will succeed; without them, he will fail."

PLANNING AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Interoperability is the state of making a process or interaction work between or among entities or definable functions. Interoperability has significant applications in bringing together such considerations as the quality, value, and practical aspects of preparedness and resources; the changing and expanding nature of global interfaces, including the environment; and the ramifications of global networks, including terrorism. Just as success can be limited by unrealistic expectations, it is equally counterproductive to excuse recurring errors and failures that clearly can be anticipated and prevented. The hallmarks of the preparedness process are ongoing planning and the anticipation of the unexpected. This approach, along with the consideration of contingencies and

alternative needs, must be actively incorporated into decision-making functions.

Ongoing planning is mandatory for the strength of all operational functions. There is a need to understand the factors and systems in play. Preparedness is an operational goal that allows for realistic solutions. A planning process allows for consideration of the spectrum of possibilities and for adjusting actions deliberately as conditions change.

Problem-solving and planning systems are usually focused on trying to define the whys; this effort is counterproductive. The large amount of time invested usually leads to divergent and contradictory conclusions. A practical perspective for planning and preparedness comes when the focus is on the whos, the whats, the hows, the whens, and the wheres, which are the operative factors.

Planning is a strategic and dynamic process that goes beyond the sole development of a plan. This process is strategic because it has a defined focus, is intentional, applies the best case, and utilizes best-fit analysis; planning incorporates “connecting the dots” to support decision making. It is dynamic because it is flexible and capable of adaptation. This process requires all assumptions to be constantly examined and reexamined. The resulting planning approach must create an atmosphere that is conducive to considering the global, environmental, and future impacts. Lasting solutions occur through maximizing the value-added contributions of a prevention perspective.

INNOVATION

Innovation is the natural outcome of the process of human inquisitiveness and allows for practical applications in changing circumstances. Innovation is stimulated by need, competition, and the search for “a better way.” It is fueled by enthusiasm and passion and is reinforced by success. The controlling forces in play must support the notion of taking necessary risks and making the required sacrifices in order for innovation to flourish. Obviously, risk entails potentially adverse consequences and losses. The “sure thing” may appear to be the better choice, but, in the long run, the potential gains are always limited. As Robert Burns wrote in *To A Mouse*, “The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry.”

WHERE LEADERSHIP GOES AWRY

Leadership should ensure the existence of a clear and open thinking process that must be applied throughout all phases of the planning, decision-making, and action-taking processes. This constitutes a spectrum of action that represents an independent continuum requiring support of all of its components simultaneously, without neglecting the importance of each individual component and its essential contributions.

The pillars that support leadership in decision making and action taking consist of four dimensions. The first is information. This can be acquired by the integration and analysis of data obtained through the sharing and cooperation, in real time, of multiple database sources, and it can be used to elicit trends. This is a systems approach. The second is effective communication, where the information used is shared and effectively transmitted to all appropriate components in real time. This communication system must be rapid, multidirectional, and multileveled. The third dimension is education and training that challenges mindsets and benefits people at all levels (leadership, personnel, community, the public, government, and the private sector). The fourth is resources management, in which the allocation and reallocation of resources (personnel, material, finances) is focused on high-risk situations and supports early proactive interventions and the reduction of consequences.

Intrinsic weaknesses are found in these areas and within the implementation of the four dimensions described. Under the stress of a crisis, the weaknesses become exaggerated and can even inhibit efforts, resulting in loss of control of vital processes and functions. Communication is America’s major skill deficiency. This weakness becomes amplified under the stress of a disaster or crisis. Many other key elements can also unravel simultaneously and/or consecutively, rendering the leadership effort less than successful.

DECISION MAKING

Decision making is a major process element applied to the progression of problem solving. In considering the methods leading to solutions, the first requirement is to describe and understand the existing problem, with its full range of ramifications and

consequences. Clearly specifying the objectives and the achievement goals contributes to an understanding of the purposes involved. In addition, all major alternatives and tradeoffs must be identified and considered. This defines the awareness phase of the decision-making process. The next, or confirmation, phase incorporates clarifying uncertainties and considering risk tolerance and linked decisions. The decision point is then reached. This is followed by the fulfillment phase, which requires effective implementation with all appropriate education on all levels, followed by monitoring, evaluation with measurable results, and outcome assessment.

With each completion of a decision-making cycle, we find ourselves back again at the beginning of a new cycle. In some ways it will be different and in some ways not. The level of challenge will vary. However, one thing is certain: we can be better prepared and wiser each time around because we are able to learn from previous experiences.

The decision-making process includes the use of a series of skills and tools that supports the process phases and their components leading up to the decision and in the critical post-decision assessment efforts. Skills can be routine, like questions and information gathering, or defining in nature, like critical thinking and problem solving. Tools can likewise be standard, like listening; enabling, like teamwork; or assembling, like connecting the dots.

Decision making is multidimensional, requiring the consideration and implementation of several courses of action simultaneously. Effective leadership understands the "wide brush" approach or, if you prefer, the need to maximize any evaluation method by utilizing both sensitivity and specificity. The significant factors consist of: applying strategic and dynamic planning; assembling all of the relevant facts, data, and information; understanding the forces at work; being aware of the systems in place and their interactions; weighing all of the competing options; and making smart choices and the best decisions.

Educational strategies are integral elements in supporting the decision-making process. Such strategies include: awareness of individual, group, and

community needs; personnel education; public, private, and community partnerships; ongoing planning and development with community involvement; exercises with the primary intent of discovering and correcting errors; and reinforcement of successful outcomes.

PREVENTION

Prevention employs planning and incorporates anticipatory counteraction to effectively avert, neutralize, or eliminate a circumstance before it can occur. Prevention equals survival and security, and it is the most cost-effective strategy available for producing positive outcomes. Sharing of information and effective communication, for example, among government agencies involved at the federal, state, and local levels or throughout a given sector is mandatory.

Thomas Paine wrote, in his 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense*, ". . . security being the true design and end of government, it unanswerably follows that whatever form thereof appears most likely to ensure it to us, with the least expense and greatest benefit, is preferable to all others." Secrecy devalues participation and trust. When faced with a crisis, an uninformed and uneducated public tends to respond with fear and panic.

RISK TAKING AND RISK MANAGEMENT

Risk is the degree of endangerment that exists in any exposure, with the consideration of loss compared with the viability of a return. It involves loss exposure, the chance of loss, and the inherent and uncertain danger present in every interaction. This definition is as applicable to crisis leadership as it is to insurance actuaries.

Risk is the potential (possibility) or likelihood (probability) of suffering harm or loss. Risk can be taken in the face of a known exposure after considering cost-benefit parameters and consequences. The goal of a risk assessment process is to acknowledge and then respond to situations that create risk and its associated consequences. It requires careful evaluation to determine the causes of the risk. The management of risk is based on quantifying it and applying efforts to reduce risk when possible.

It is appropriate to paraphrase an often quoted

adage, "No 'risk,' no gain." Risk is always a consideration when functioning in the realm of crisis leadership. A helpful guidepost to support necessary risk taking is the second adage, "It's not always what you do, but how you do it."

DISCONNECTS

Major disconnects have plagued crisis leadership and the disciplines of security, emergency preparedness, and disaster management. Significant disconnects relate to professional preparedness and the competence of the leadership. A project was undertaken in mid-2002 to evaluate the basic skills possessed by individuals in security leadership positions, especially in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, crisis. The theme of the project was to define and evaluate the desired criteria through posing the quandary: Wanted: Security Pros Able to Expect the Unexpected.

Security professionals are responsible for a spectrum of tasks, including the unexpected. Preparation, experience, and skills and strategies mastery are mandatory. The job description includes being able to analyze risks, determine vulnerabilities, develop strategies, plan, implement solutions, evaluate personnel performance, establish training, educate personnel, support operational policies, communicate effectively, and generate stability. There is a need to determine what preparation the applicant has; the skills required; the training needed; and the tools, strategies, and skills present to handle the unexpected. Prevention strategies for terrorism and emergency management require examining risk assessment, risk modeling, and risk management.

Security professionals must have the skills to perform required diversified functions. Dynamic educational changes reverse deficiencies and enhance functional improvement.

Security professionals from varying backgrounds and employment were evaluated for entry-level familiarity with nine basic security skills. Included were 300 individuals holding senior security management positions, distributed throughout the United States and among diverse entities (corporations, universities, government). A tested information-gathering

instrument was utilized, and the results demonstrated that 273 (91 percent) possessed familiarity with four or fewer of the nine skills, 18 were familiar with four to six, and nine recognized six to eight. The security professionals were previously recruited to the private sector from two primary sources: the military and law enforcement.

In approaching crisis and disaster situations, leadership tends to focus primarily on the response aspects. In doing so, the totality of the disaster gets obscured, and the prevention, preparedness, and long-term recovery components are neglected. The result is a failure in leadership. The basic need is for a commonly expected purpose. To accomplish such a goal demands an inclusive process that brings together all aspects of the planning, decision-making, and implementation teams with the community, the population in general, and other support entities. To make this work requires that the existing disconnects relating to communication and education be resolved. Unequal relationships between federal and local entities tend to be the rule, with artificial interactions and the development of distance and pretense. These contacts are less than productive and are actually detrimental to the purpose of a disaster effort. The paradigm shift from primarily disaster response to comprehensive disaster management with increased collaboration and communication is essential. This responsibility is within the purview of crisis leadership.

John Adams, the author of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, incorporated the following into the text: "It is the obligation of the State to educate its citizenry. The foundation of America's democracy is based on an educated citizenry." Education at all levels, including the community, is an essential tool for any disaster program to succeed, yet at best such approaches are virtually nonexistent. There is an almost elitist attitude on the part of emergency preparedness and disaster management professionals in considering the value and potential contributions of the public in general to a disaster effort. This seems to parallel the attitude of federal officials toward local officials. There is an important educational lesson here to be learned by all.

Natural disasters seem to have changed for the

United States over the past century. These disaster events have become more severe. The factors of worsening weather patterns, changes in population demographics, infrastructure deterioration, deficient land use planning, and building code inadequacies have significantly impacted outcomes. Add to this the existing, expedient political denial, and the forecast for the future becomes miserable.

FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP: THE LEADERSHIP VOID

Hurricane Katrina came on August 29, 2005, but left its devastation, both of property and of human beings, to likely continue for decades. The more that predisaster plan documents are reviewed and the state of preparedness evaluated, the more the basic process is found to have been flawed. Glaring deficiencies of communication and cooperation among entities at various levels persist. Failures of the recovery phase continue despite the promises of funding and programs, especially in light of a waning public consciousness.

Immediately following the disaster brought on by the ravages of Hurricane Katrina, the Gulf and Texas coasts faced the threats of Hurricane Rita, which, fortunately, only partially materialized. The challenges posed by Rita created stresses for the disaster preparedness and emergency management systems of Houston and surrounding communities in terms of evacuation planning and implementation. The existing strategies and tactics unfortunately failed. Communication systems were ineffective and community education was nonexistent, resulting in confusion and an unnecessary and unsafe evacuation process. Had community education elements been part of the operational disaster planning process and been instituted and reinforced in advance—a doable ideal—effective and safe evacuation would have occurred.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), already in disarray due to changes instituted during its absorption by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), functioned poorly in almost all aspects of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, including preparedness and response, and continues to function dimly in ongoing recovery efforts to date. Leading candidates for

FEMA director have removed themselves from consideration because of agency failures. One third of the most senior positions are filled only on an acting basis. A leadership void exists, and the acting director has been made the permanent director. A crisis and failure of leadership continues, as does the uncertainty of FEMA's role and future.

PERSPECTIVES

Leaders create and apply ongoing planning, implement effective communication, and apply educational programs. They should have developed the applicable skills and be able to utilize the specialized tools that support their efforts. They should be able to delegate responsibility while continuing to maintain overall control of relevant actions and interventions.

In addition to top-down guidance, successful outcomes require a bottom-up, "grassroots" commitment, along with a community-centric focus that creates the drive for cooperative partnerships. These partnerships must include the active participation of the community and encompass the private and public sectors. The necessary tools, skills, and perspectives must support function from a prevention perspective and be able to respond to global and future threats and their ramifications. The flow of information must sustain an environment conducive to prevention.

Practical applications and solutions are created using evidence-based decision making. The applications of technology impact prevention, yet simultaneously contribute to infrastructure vulnerabilities.

Evaluation and analysis of results are required, and these evaluations must consider growth potential and the anticipation of and preparation for future needs. Such an evaluation process finds its value in allowing for dynamic changes over time, changes that can be tested through a coherent assessment sequence to produce improvement.

Leadership is action, not position. One does not become a leader until recognition as a leader is conferred by those who have been led.

Saul B. Wilen, MD, CEO, International Horizons Unlimited, San Antonio, Texas.