



Are You The Right Leader For A Crisis?

Occasionally, a society, or business, experiences events of profound significance and disruption. These events may be understood broadly as crises. During periods of crisis, leaders must fulfill several functions. They must explain, make sense of, identify and clarify responses to the immediate situation. Concurrently they must comfort and reassure a shocked, confused, and often angry group of followers.

Moreover, how does a leader turn a crisis into an opportunity? How does a leader remove the group feeling that they have lost control over their environment and inspire them toward acceptance of superordinate goals? How does a leader arouse a group from complacency, overcome organizational inertia, and move past ill-advised responses and defensiveness in the face of threat?

Certainly, there are leaders who, during times of intense difficulty, rise to the occasion and by sheer force of will and character take control and “save” the organization, but not all leaders are charismatic . . . and not all situations can be resolved by a charismatic approach.

What all leaders can do in periods of crisis is communicate! Leader’s words help make sense of a situation and provides a generalized view that subtly directs group interpretations. They impose organizational order, control responses to deviations from the norm, energizes and aligns the people around common cause, standardize practices, revise existing standards as appropriate and creates a roadmap that presents the opportunity to minimize negative aspects *and* maximize the positive potentialities of the current environmental uncertainty.

An OPS Associate’s dissertation succinctly establishes four overarching activities that are requisite for any leader during times of crisis. A leader, regardless of personality, style, or size of organization, must:

- (1) Define the crisis!
 - Tell the story in an understandable and meaningful way
 - Offer explanations and/or apologies
 - Facilitate the learning/information flow
 - Pay symbolic attention by using tone, words and analogies that link the crisis with understandable events
 - Promote your reality and direction as the popular reality and organizational purpose

- (2) Unify the organization!
 - Link yourself to the greater organization
 - Emphasize core values
 - Express sympathy to those harmed and participate in memorializing and grieving

- (3) Take command of the situation!
- Act as the spokesperson
 - Be decisive and voice personal resolve
 - Initiate your organization's crisis/response plan
 - Explain how you will mitigate individual/organizational harm
 - Explain linkages with internal/external crisis teams and other groups
 - Be flexible, accessible and open
 - Commit to appropriate changes and signal willingness to change
- (4) Create a vision for the future!
- Prioritize activities and resources
 - Emphasize organizational renewal via public/written commitments
 - Create a prospective vision

These four leadership actions are fundamental, but do not represent a formulaic answer to how to lead in crisis. A wise man once said, "When you think you are a 'leader,' you're probably not." Why? Because once you reached that point, you have most probably settled on a "one size fits all" leadership paradigm. Every call to lead is different and every leader must adapt their approach to recognize and accommodate the sometimes dramatic, often subtle, situational differences. If you would like more information or guidance please contact us at www.opsinc.com or 410-871-0995.

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