



1

Crisis Leadership: The Crisis Whisperer

You may not always make the right decisions in a fast-moving, high-consequence, unexpected, and highly visible crisis situation that presents unknown and incorrect information. However, by following the time-tested guiding principles in this book, your decisions can stay “within the guardrails” and keep you and your organization out of the ditch. In today’s popular culture, a person who displays noteworthy calm and effective influence is often dubbed a “whisperer” – one who gains unexpected positive results – whether with horses, ghosts, dogs or – toughest of all – people. In this book, we expand that definition to include a highly effective crisis leader as “crisis whisperer.”

This chapter will help you to:

- *See what it takes to become a crisis whisperer.*
- *Apply the be-know-do principle.*
- *Stay out of the crisis red zone.*
- *Follow the five guiding principles of crisis leadership.*
- *Understand the crisis leadership mindset.*

1.1 Finding Crisis Leadership

Crisis leaders or whisperers can be found throughout the ranks of any organization. Certainly, the board, CEO, and top management are tasked with leading at high levels. But, anyone with leadership responsibilities within his or her silo of responsibility can, and should, be a crisis leader when his or her number is chosen to be on center stage of a crisis. Let's take a look at what we know from experience that differentiates an excellent crisis leader from a more tactical responder.

Significant differences between tactical crisis management and strategic crisis leadership can be identified. An effective crisis leader must consider and respond to both the tactical and strategic issues that emerge during a crisis. Some of the high-level differences are:

Tactical Responder

Reacts to issues as they arise
Short-term focus
Process oriented
Narrow focus
Implements tactical tasks

Crisis Leader

Anticipates what is ahead
Long-term, consequence-related focus
Directed by guiding principles
Wide focus
Uses judgment

Crisis leadership is more about who you are than what you know.

Strategic crisis leadership involves high-leverage skills that are vital to corporate recovery in the midst of a crisis of any sort. To be a crisis leader, you will need skills that:

- ▶ Define the crisis beyond the obvious.
- ▶ Anticipate the effects of the crisis on impacted stakeholders.
- ▶ Assess the impact of the crisis on core assets.
- ▶ Forecast the intended and unintended consequences of decisions.
- ▶ Follow the values and guiding principles of the organization – and your own ethical standards that may be tested to the limit.

Crisis leadership is more about who you are than what you know. At the risk of being redundant, I'm going to say that one more time to assure clarity. *Crisis leadership is more about who you are than what you know.* No set of learned crisis leadership techniques will overcome a lack of character, ethics, or integrity – or will offset unlawful behavior. An effective crisis leader must act deliberately, quickly, effectively, and ethically with honesty and high moral

values. Unfortunately, as human beings, we are only partially aware of our character flaws, incompetencies, and knowledge gaps that may emerge when we are in full-stress, high-consequence situations.

1.2 Becoming a Crisis Whisperer

Several years ago, I was called into the office of the CEO of a large oil and gas company, not sure why I was being summoned. This CEO told me that his company was obviously in a high-risk industry in which crises unfortunately tend to occur. He said his observation was that, as CEO, he was the only person in the company looking out for the enterprise as a whole during crisis response. Everyone else seemed to be looking down his or her own silo of responsibility without regard for the impacts of his or her individual actions on other silos and the enterprise as a whole. So, he asked me to develop a Strategic Crisis Leadership Checklist for all the managers in the company to follow during company crises. Without a doubt, they still needed to fulfill the tactical, silo-driven responsibilities assigned to them. However, this CEO wanted all the managers up and down the organization to be acutely aware of the impact their actions could have on the enterprise as a whole and upon other silos within the organization.

He gave me one last order related to the Strategic Crisis Leadership Checklist. It had to be on one sheet of paper or he wouldn't read it. I complied, but did cheat one little bit. I put it on one sheet of paper, but used both sides! Fortunately, he let me get by with it. The checklist that I developed has now been implemented with senior management teams throughout the world in several languages, and it is included at the end of this chapter for you and your senior management team to use for strategic crisis response.

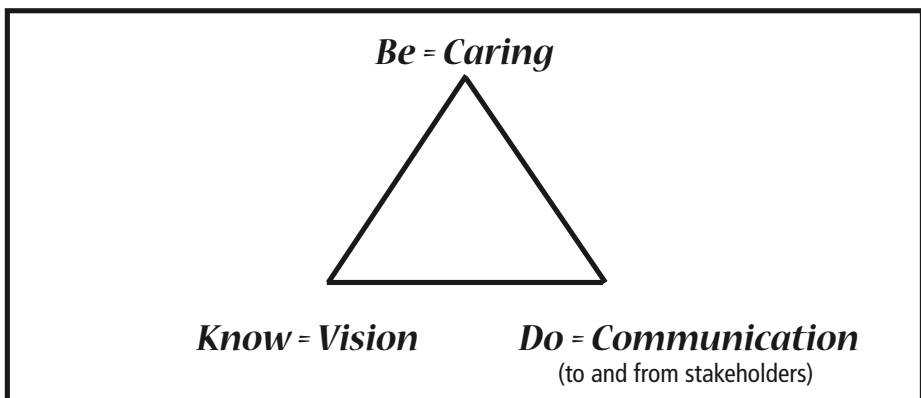


Figure 1-1. *Be-Know-Do*

1.3 Be-Know-Do

As I embarked on the development of the Strategic Crisis Leadership Checklist, I found no definitive books on crisis leadership at that time. Having served in the US Marine Corps, I decided to investigate the training provided for combat officers to see if I could transpose their combat leadership training into the corporate culture. Combat officers must lead in uncertain, high-consequence, fluid environments. That sounded like corporate crisis management to me. So, I embarked on a journey through the various US military combat officer training manuals.

As shown in Figure 1-1, the US Army defines the three basic components of leadership as *be-know-do* (US Army, 1999).

- ▶ “Be” is about who you are.
- ▶ “Know” is about the skills and knowledge you have acquired.
- ▶ “Do” is about the actions that you take on a timely basis.

Purposeful attention to all three components of strategic crisis leadership will increase the likelihood that you’ll know what to ask, what to do, and how to do it. And more importantly, you’ll learn to manage the unexpected.

What are the skills needed to meet these strategic crisis leadership responsibilities?

Imagine this situation: You don’t know it now, but you are about to receive the initial notification that something dreadful has occurred. When that information arrives in this earliest phase of a crisis response, certain behaviors lead to success. Let’s look at the characteristics of some of the most effective crisis leaders whom I have observed: the crisis whisperers.

Caring during crisis response is not a feeling. Caring is a set of corporate and personal behaviors that elicit the perception in impacted stakeholders that you and your company truly care.

You need to be caring. In my experience, I have observed that demonstration of caring is more important than all other leadership traits combined. If you come across as uncaring, people will become outraged, they won’t trust you, and they will be less likely to cooperate. Caring during crisis response is not a feeling. Caring is a set of corporate and personal *behaviors* that elicit the perception in impacted stakeholders that you and your company truly care.

Crisis whisperers assume a demeanor of what I have labeled as “calm assertiveness.” They respond to crisis situations in a composed manner, do what they need to do, and use a template of caring to filter decisions and actions.

Being calmly assertive. “Calm” means the leaders are free from agitation, excitement, and disturbance. They remain emotionally balanced. Like the duck on water, their feet (and minds) may be paddling frantically beneath the surface. Externally, they model a sense of calm control for others without the distractions of assigning blame and judgment. The “assertive” component means that the crisis whisperer is moving *toward* active crisis involvement while remaining calm and balanced. Assertiveness is in contrast to the aggressive behavior of some less effective crisis leaders who move *against* the crisis and people. Also, the calm assertive leader is in contrast to the avoidant leader, who tends to passively move away from the crisis by isolating or detaching from the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive challenges of the crisis. Aggression and immobilization are not good crisis leadership strategies.

Two mayors in crisis. We all have noticed that some leaders are excellent crisis managers when the unexpected occurs and others fail miserably. Compare the reputational outcome relating to the response of two mayors in crisis.

- ▶ Mayor Rudy Giuliani of New York City was named “person of the year” by *Time* news magazine following his widely applauded response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He recognized the extreme need of people to receive accurate and timely information. Giuliani bravely remained on the streets of New York City, potentially at his own peril, not knowing where a next attack might occur. Even though he couldn't see them, he recognized that people throughout all five boroughs of the city (and ultimately the US and world) needed information. He remained highly visible and conveyed accurate and timely information through the media in a caring and compassionate manner. It is important to note that Giuliani was absolutely committed to crisis management planning, training, and exercising prior to the terror attack of 2001. Crisis preparedness has its advantages.
- ▶ So, when Hurricane Katrina flooded New Orleans, we expected a similar response from Mayor Ray Nagin. We expected Nagin, like Giuliani, to demonstrate his ability to assist community members and other impacted stakeholders in a timely and compassionate manner. Instead, there was wide criticism of Nagin not following the city's evacuation plan, even though the school buses to be used were widely

available. Additionally, he was perceived as self-serving when he evacuated himself, leaving thousands of people to fend for themselves. Then, instead of taking responsibility, he publicly blamed the federal government and Governor Kathleen Blanco for their inadequate responses. There apparently was some truth related to the poor response of FEMA and Governor Blanco, but it did not absolve Nagin of perceived incompetence in crisis leadership. He didn't demonstrate that he was commander in chief of New Orleans when the city needed crisis leadership the most. Even after Governor Blanco had called a state of emergency for Louisiana prior to landfall, Mayor Nagin did not decisively take charge. In his press conference just hours before Hurricane Katrina demolished New Orleans, casually dressed with an apparent lack of urgency and command, Nagin stated to the media, "Although the track could change, forecasters believe Hurricane Katrina will affect New Orleans. We may call for a voluntary evacuation later this afternoon or tomorrow morning."

Being in the red zone. Those crisis leaders like Nagin, who do not maintain this state of calm assertiveness, are prone to enter what I call the "crisis leadership red zone." When calmness is not maintained in the fast moving and chaotic pace of a crisis, a combination of frustration and a need to dominate or avoid tends to manifest. Additionally, if a calm assertive balance isn't maintained, crisis leaders can easily move toward a meltdown where they lose focus and effectiveness.

How can crisis leaders compensate for their unknown character flaws, incompetencies, and knowledge gaps that often emerge when "the heat is on"? The Strategic Crisis Leadership Checklist at the end of this chapter can help, especially the included five guiding principles. Later chapters will cover the common "stress styles" that can affect leaders while in crisis.

1.3.2 What Do You Need to Know?

As a crisis leader, you must have a vision and know the values (guiding principles) of your organization for crisis resolution. Without a clear and compelling vision and full knowledge of your personal and organizational values for response and recovery, you will not be able to lead your people adequately during times of crisis. In this early phase, it is very important to define for yourself and others what you want to happen. What would a good outcome look like? Once the desired outcome is identified, consider doing reverse sequence planning. In a guiding principle-oriented manner, plan backward to the present what you need to decide and do to move in