

Crisis Leadership in the Midst of Chaos

Crisis leadership is different from
everyday leadership



DONN LeVIE JR.

DONN LeVIE JR.

STRATEGIES, LLC

ENGAGE. POSITION. INFLUENCE. CONVERT.



Crisis Leadership in the Midst of Chaos

Crisis leadership is different from everyday leadership

In normal circumstances, leadership can sometimes be thought of as the daily management of micro-crisis incidents. Issues and problems often get resolved quickly or are delegated to others for resolution. However, in larger moments, such as war, natural disasters, or pandemics, crisis leadership demands the expression of a unifying vision of mythic proportions as the effort by all affected must be focused on returning everyday life to a sense of normalcy sooner than later.

Let there be no mistake: crisis leadership requires intense focus and a commitment to action to affect necessary interventions that eliminate the fear, uncertainty, and chaos that have descended upon society.

The Coronavirus pandemic created an atmosphere of uncertainty, confusion, and panic among citizens of the world. As leaders of nations and corporations attempted to sort out priorities to protect people, the public health system, and the global economy, they had to embrace a singular charge of their office at the time: bringing everything back to “normal.”

Crisis leadership involves different approaches

Crisis leadership differs from the everyday form of leadership (such as visionary leadership and reform leadership) in many respects, particularly the sudden threat to prioritized goals and objectives. When life, liberty, or property are in jeopardy, all other considerations become secondary. Besides focusing on the logistical and material needs of those affected by such Black Swan events (events that are characterized by their extreme rarity, their severe impact, and the widespread insistence they were obvious in hindsight), leaders are often elevated in stature and status by people who may feel helpless, confused, and lost as they turn to them for assurance.

One frequently cited and dissected example of this charismatic/crisis-response leadership style is that of former President George W. Bush before and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In the wake of his rallying the country, his popularity soared to record levels. Speeches by Churchill and FDR before and after World War II have likewise been analyzed with software to determine levels of charismatic/crisis-response leadership and how long favorability ratings endured in post-crisis scenarios.

Elements of charismatic/crisis-response leadership

Here are a few factors that influence your charismatic/crisis-response leadership style:

- Articulating a strong—perhaps even radical—vision and mission that others can tie their self-esteem and sense of self-control to
- Sharing your values, objectives and vision so that others can internalize them
- Embracing a strong personal ethical and moral commitment to those stated values, objectives, and vision
- Others' willingness to set aside personal self-interest during the crisis for the sake of the greater population need

Linguistic tools for charismatic/crisis-response leadership

In such times, leaders invoke powerful rhetorical messaging to help bring some sense of stability, balance, and control to those affected. Such instances give rise to what's called *charismatic leadership*, also referred to as *crisis-response leadership*.

Let's explore the attributes and circumstances of charismatic/crisis-response leadership that you may find helpful when the unexpected, improbable, or catastrophic shows up in your environment.

Charismatic/crisis response leadership

“Charisma” is derived from the Greek word for “gift” and was used in the early Christian church to describe individual gifts of healing and prophecy. The term was later expanded and secularized to describe “any leader who derives his or her power from particularly exceptional personal traits.”

Research suggests that an extraordinary circumstance can serve as the antecedent crucible from which your innate charismatic leadership “presence” can emerge as a crisis-response. It’s an interaction that’s primed by influential rhetoric and persuasive speech delivery which occurs between you (the leader) and others (employees, supporters, followers, population) during or immediately after a crisis to align with the necessary commitments, sacrifices, and courage to overcome the challenge.

Walt Manning, CFE and CEO of the Techno-Crime Institute states that:

"Not only is there a need for a charismatic leader to effectively direct the crisis response, it's also important to have the right person in that role..."

— *Walt Manning, Techno-Crime Institute*

Influence and persuasion strategies play a significant role in creating the allure of charismatic/crisis-response leaders. In that vein, your use of rhetorical devices (linguistic “tools” that use a specific sentence structure to evoke audience reaction) form the foundation for generating an emotionally focused appeal that the masses will (hopefully) embrace. The philosopher Plato referred to the study of rhetoric as “the art of ruling the minds of men” and that’s accomplished with language, influence, and persuasion.

There are 17 different rhetoric tools at your disposal that fall into four categories all prominent charismatic/crisis-response leaders have used to deliver message of mass appeal

- **Logos:** use of logic to convince or persuade; includes use of statistics, facts, statements of authorities.
- **Pathos:** appealing to emotion to further advance prescribed actions, attitudes, or behaviors.
- **Ethos:** ethical appeals for persuading others that the speaker and the cause are just, serious, and necessary to affect the arduous task(s) that lie ahead.
- **Kairos:** related to the timing of a prescribed course of action or idea where historical relevance, consequence, and significance forms an important part of the argument.

For example, as a charismatic/crisis-response leader who must appeal to a group's sense of collective identity during and after a catastrophe, you would likely incorporate these rhetoric strategies in your speech:

- Make references to history and tradition as a binding agent to establish a sense of community
- Use narratives (stories) that emphasize that collective identity
- Reinforce the shared collective values to further unify
- Focus on your similarity to those in the group ("We're all in this together..." if that's really true!)
- Highlight shared values and moral justifications to undertake necessary political, legal, or social actions
- Repeat calls for maintaining hope and faith going forward
- Appeal to the group's self-worth, which forms the basis of our very thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, all of which can become paralyzing during a crisis. Upholding the group self-worth is critical to the forward collective momentum.

Here's an example: the daily Coronavirus task force briefings all contain elements of statistics, facts, and authority statements (*logos*); emotional pleas from authority figures to shelter in place, wear masks, practice social distancing (*pathos*); public appeals from authority figures conveying that severe measures being undertaken are just, serious, and necessary to affect the "flattening of the curve" (*ethos*); and that now is the time to take the necessary action to thwart this historic pandemic (*kairos*).

Only 20/20 hindsight reveals the efficacy of some of that advice.

Charismatic/crisis-reform leadership vs visionary/reform leadership

The leadership approaches for combating and overcoming crisis often require extreme measures and intense focus. During times of extended threats, high uncertainty, and multi-faceted disruptions, many decisions must be made quickly, unilaterally, and with just-in-time input from others on a "need to know" basis.

Charismatic/crisis-response leadership often must bypass, amend or suspend traditional policies and procedures. Federal emergencies must do the same while remaining under the guidance of constitutional foundations. This type of leadership is one that is not treated lightly nor is it an approach used for any situation but the most severe of crises.

Crisis, calamity, and catastrophe make little room for any other type of leadership style at the helm other than charismatic/crisis-response. The hierarchical top-down command structure in government and corporations works well in times of crisis—to a point. As a crisis-management task force tackles its respective responsibilities and logistics, the command-and-control approach of charismatic/crisis-response must yield *some* of that leadership to those coordinating efforts along the front lines (the Coronavirus Task Force was an example of leadership delegation). They become *crisis-response implementors* where rapid, immediate execution of strategy is the priority.

Visionary, or reform, leadership often is present with crisis-response leadership efforts. Reform leadership involves different actors, actions, and agendas, typically demands listening to multilateral perspectives, participating in lengthy discussions, and back-and-forth compromise.

Visionary/reform leadership, while valuable for ushering in new capital projects, acquisitions, or initiatives, has a major drawback for addressing catastrophic events: such future-forward policies and thinking create challenges for focusing on the immediate crisis on everyone's doorstep.

Walt Manning again offers a poignant perspective:

"During a crisis, there's usually not time for debate or for pursuing other agendas. It's a time that requires comprehensive, decisive, and coordinated action with everyone pulling toward the same goal. Otherwise, you have a high possibility for disaster."

— *Walt Manning*

Conflating charismatic/crisis-response leadership efforts with visionary/reform leadership dilutes or delays the actions needed to implement emergency stopgap measures to counter what catastrophe leaves in its wake. While some immediate and autonomous reform may be inevitable during crisis, it is in the crisis-response leader's best interest to consult with vested stakeholders for their support before any extreme measures need be considered.

There's a time and place for visionary/reform leadership; it's just not when trying to deal with a crisis, as former Air Force Lt. Col. Robert Blair relates:

"One of my mentors from 25 years in uniform was the 37th Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Larry Spencer. Coming from the financial comptroller community, he taught us when we make a priority of taking care of the member's pay meant to ease his concerns about his family. That freed his mind to focus on the battle in front of him...take care of your people and they will take care of you; that's just Leadership 101..."

— *Robert Blair, Lt. Col. USAF (retired)*

In other words, leaders shouldn't try to reform their way out of a crisis. Crisis-response leadership cannot afford the posturing that reform leadership entails.



More leadership strategies at:

www.donnleviejrstrategies.com

Donn LeVie Jr. is a respected leadership influence strategist/ consultant, award-winning author, leadership coach and mentor, and global speaker who focuses on how people speak (**linguistics**), how they think (**cognitive psychology**), and how they make decisions (**behavioral economics**).

In his roles leading people and programs for Fortune 100 companies (**Phillips Petroleum, Motorola, Intel Corp.**), government agencies (**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**), and academia (**the University of Houston Downtown College – Department of Natural Sciences and Mathematics**), Donn has been directly involved with global oceanographic research projects, multi-million-dollar offshore oil and gas exploration programs, high-tech chip design initiatives, and teaching fundamentals of petroleum exploration and production to undergraduate students.

Donn stepped away from the corporate world in 2013 to launch **Donn LeVie Jr. STRATEGIES, LLC**. Over his career he's spoken at more than 70 conferences and since 2011 has been a regular presenter and leadership strategist at the annual Global Fraud Conference sponsored by the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners.

Donn's client and audience list spans organizations from the public, private and education sectors, including the FBI, Dept. of Education Inspector General's Office, New York Port Authority, National Science Foundation, FDIC, Enterprise Holdings, Ernst & Young, the City of Nashville, Franklin and Marshall College, and many more.

As an author, Donn's books have won the Global eBook Award and the International Book Award (*Confessions of a Hiring Manager*, 2012; *Strategic Career Engagement*, 2016). Donn's newly-released books, *From the Underworld to the Boardroom: True Tales of Fraud, Corruption, Counterfeiting, and Cons* and *STACKING THE DECK: Career Strategies for Outmaneuvering the Competition* are available only through Donn's programs.

UNAUTHORIZED COPYING/DISTRIBUTION IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED.