Crisis Leadership: The 4 Keys to Preparing

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The United States has experienced great turbulence in recent years, serving as a vivid reminder of the crucial role of leadership in cultivating resilient communities — communities able to prepare effectively for, respond to and recover from major crises. Devastating tornadoes, derechos, hurricanes, floods, wildfires and volcanic eruptions across the nation have reminded us of our vulnerability to the vicious whims of Mother Nature. The Newtown, Conn., and Aurora, Colo., massacres as well as the Boston Marathon bombings are tragedies resulting from the ill intentions of human perpetrators. Events like these (and others such as the massive industrial explosion at the fertilizer factory in West, Texas) provide extreme tests of community resilience.

When the moment of truth arrives as it did for Boston during the marathon bombings, for New York and New Orleans during hurricanes Sandy and Katrina, it becomes apparent not only that strong leadership in the moment is needed, but also that many of the key preconditions for effective crisis/emergency management and community resilience have been set long before the crisis. In *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership Under Pressure*, my co-authors and I argue that crisis management can be usefully broken down into five key challenges that appear repeatedly in the hundreds of crisis cases from around the world that we studied. These are: sense-making, decision-making and coordination, meaning-making (crisis communication), ending ("accounting" and terminating the crisis), and learning.

However, recent experience drives home the point that a crucial responsibility of leaders (inside and outside of government) begins well before the crisis. Therefore, the five leadership tasks should be complemented by a sixth: preparing. Preparing consists of several subtasks: organizing and selecting, planning, educating and training, and cultivating vigilance and protecting preparedness.

Organizing and Selecting

The first responsibility of leaders with regard to crisis management is to ensure that an appropriate crisis organization is in place and to select suitable staff for key functions in that organization. There is no single optimal form of crisis organization; rather a crisis organization should be designed taking into account the characteristics and context of a given setting.

Organizations that fail to develop a specialized crisis organization make a design choice as well, often by default. That choice is likely to be suboptimal as most organizations are not designed and have not organically developed in ways that facilitate coping with the extraordinary pressures, information flows and pace associated with crises. Even organizations — such as media and first responder organizations — used to rapid real-time operations may be overwhelmed when the scale, scope, complexity and pace of the operational tempo increases dramatically.

Key challenges include specifying the role of top leadership (do they keep running the everyday organization, the crisis organization or both?), developing surge capacity, developing means of coping with information deficit and overload in periods of acute crisis, cultivating sustainable staffing and stress monitoring functions, among others. Selecting senior and mid-level leaders for crisis management roles is also challenging. Many leaders are promoted on the basis of skills, personality traits and management styles primarily demonstrated and enacted under steady state conditions. Such leaders may, or may not,

be equipped by personality, background, previous education and training (see below) for managing effectively in crisis. If, as is often suggested, we are living in increasingly crisis-prone times, it may be that crisis management aptitude should play more of a role in leader selection in general.

Planning (to Improvise)

In much of the literature (and among some practitioners), there is some skepticism about the value of crisis planning. Planning is subject to many pressures, obstacles and constraints that can easily detract from the utility of the planning function and products. As Lee Clarke of Rutgers University pointed out in his provocative book *Mission Improbable*, there are countless examples of crisis/emergency plans based on flawed assumptions divorced from the reality of crisis operations and resource availability — resulting in so-called fantasy documents. Still, when approached, packaged and implemented properly, planning may have great value.

Vigilant planning proceeds from several key insights discernible in the literature and evolving practice. First, it's important to distinguish between planning for structured, well understood contingencies (e.g., plane crashes by airports and airlines) as opposed to other relatively less structured and somewhat less familiar challenges (e.g., traffic disruptions associated with volcanic ash clouds). While coping with plane crashes may be facilitated by very detailed, scripted plans that ensure that key actions are resourced and implemented in proper sequence, unexpected challenges require enactment of problem identification and application of creative problem solving.

Given the propensity for unanticipated problems to arise in crisis, a modular, capability-based approach tends to be best. A key planning function is to identify capabilities and resources that can be combined in novel ways that are well adapted to the event and make the most of available resources and capabilities. Planning does not have to be rigid and should not be an obstacle to improvisation. Rather, like training it provides a platform enabling more qualified improvisation. Though it is has become something of a truism, the planning process (which builds familiarity with organizational contexts, capabilities, social networks and enhances psychological preparedness) is often far more valuable than the plans themselves.

It is also important to note that the current leadership of FEMA has helped to revitalize planning efforts by thinking bigger about potential threats, encouraging leaders and emergency managers to plan and prepare for maximum of maximums scenarios. The logic is based on the plausible assumption that systems prepared for the worst-case scenario will be able to cope effectively with a broader range of challenges than those prepared for more moderate and commonly occurring types of contingencies.

Educating, Training and Exercises

Leaders must be (and try to ensure that their team members, key subordinates and key partners are) educated, trained and exercised in preparation for crisis management. It's increasingly recognized in many countries that crisis/emergency/disaster management represents a specialized political/administrative sub-discipline. One approach is to emphasize the need to educate and develop a cadre of professionals equipped to manage or facilitate the management of crises and emergencies. Such a profession could depart from military, medical, legal or other professional models. Professionalization entails the identification of a body of knowledge, core skills and a code of ethics. Suitably specified, this can be helpful; care must be taken, however, to prevent the emergence of a static orthodoxy and excessive homogeneity.

Professionalization is just one aspect of what is a more complicated equation. When facing major crises, partnership between political leaders and professionals is essential. This means that political leaders who are not professionals must be educated as to the nature of crisis management, informed of what is required of them in crisis, familiarized with crisis planning and organization, and equipped to engage in meaningful communicative interaction with others inside and outside of their organizations. Thus, crisis management education must be both conceptual and practical. Individual and collective crisis management skills are best acquired and honed through hands-on practice.

There are a wide variety of powerful instructional designs and techniques (both traditional and technology enhanced) suitable for crisis management training and exercises. Instructional designs and techniques should be consciously and explicitly adapted to the goals and purposes of a given training or exercise. One size (and one instructional design) does not and cannot fit all.

Cultivating Vigilance and Protecting Preparedness

One of the great challenges, especially in organizations and communities that have been spared from frequent exposure to disasters and crises, is to break through inertia and defense mechanisms that detract from psychological and organizational preparedness. A common mentality is "it won't happen here," in which threats and hazards that have impacted other organizations and communities are dismissed as irrelevant. In order to motivate (and secure funding for) preparedness efforts, leaders must cultivate an "it could happen here" mentality for themselves and those who follow them. This entails actively monitoring the crisis experiences of others and asking the tough questions of "Are we ready to cope with a contingency like this?" and "What can we do now to be more prepared when it is our turn?" In the absence of or in between crises, leaders must protect preparedness budgets and provide resources — a particularly difficult task in the contemporary climate of budget austerity.

The resilient community response to the Boston Marathon bombings is suggestive. Despite the fact that Boston (unlike New York, London, Madrid or Oslo) had not previously suffered a terrorist attack of this magnitude, Greater Boston demonstrated an impressive capacity to absorb a devastating blow, come together, collaborate with state and federal partners, and emerge from the crisis as a community more than worthy of the slogan "Boston Strong." However, we should keep in mind that the preconditions for this response were created by leaders, socio-political conditions — and investments in preparedness — long before the bombs at the marathon went off.

When we judge our leaders' and their organizations' performance as crisis managers, it is important not only to look at how they rose (or failed to rise) to the challenge on "game day," but also to what extent they empowered and prepared their followers, partners and citizens long before the moment of crisis.

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