

Strategic Leadership in Times of Crisis



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INTRODUCTION

With increasingly commonplace threats of intentional violence, citywide terrorism, natural disasters, and unpredictable accidents, leaders navigate disaster situations on a more frequent basis than they may be prepared to encounter. Noteworthy events such as the September 11 terrorist attacks, Boston Marathon bombing, Virginia Tech University shootings, Aurora, Colorado movie theater shootings, Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings, Hurricane Sandy, Hurricane Katrina, and many other heartbreaking incidents impact both specific organizations and the broader community. Escalating media connectivity and social networks place organizations and leaders at greater risk for public perception crises on a routine basis, forcing them to take preventative steps well in advance of potential crises and remain vigilant in responding to such situations. When the unthinkable happens, leaders face the daunting task of not only responding to the tragedy, but also leading their community through the response and recovery efforts. Leadership actions and strategic decisions in the midst of a crisis chart a course for organizational survival or demise, as well as the leader's personal and professional wellness.

Strategic leadership provides “direction for translating the vision into action and is the basis for the development of specific mechanisms to help the organization achieve goals” (Daft, 2001, p. 472). By “taking a specific step toward the future” (Daft, 2001, p. 487), strategic leaders anticipate complex or uncertain situations, challenge conventional thinking, interpret patterns and ambiguity, make difficult decisions, align stakeholders through engaging communication, and facilitate organizational learning (Schoemaker, Krupp, & Howland, 2013). While many leaders are skilled at these activities under normal operations, the ability to realize vision and achieve organizational goals in the midst of disaster is perhaps the most critical obligation a leader encounters. Leadership actions in the wake of tragedy determine a leader's future, as well as the long-term survival of their organization. Responding to crises in meaningful ways restores faith in the institution and demonstrates an ethic of care to external and internal constituents. Failure to engage in critical crisis response activities or act in a timely manner dissolves constituents' trust and may have dire consequences for the organization's future.

To learn more about the nature of crisis leadership, the author conducted an extensive research study on individuals who encountered high-profile disaster situations. These leaders served within a college or university and held the highest-ranking student affairs administration role at their institution (typically with a Dean of Students or Vice President of Student Affairs title). The 11 individuals who participated in the study navigated some of the most heartbreaking and recognizable university tragedies in the previous 15 years. They unexpectedly faced intentional violence, citywide terrorism, natural disasters, and unfortunate accidents that included significant loss of life and forever changed their institution. The author spoke with each leader for five hours over the course of two years, learning more about their personal experiences, professional responses, and advice for individuals who encounter similar situations in the future. While their experiences occurred within a higher education setting, lessons learned may be

applicable to lower-level schools, non-profit agencies, corporations, or other public venues. The current chapter offers an introduction to crisis management literature, theories to support learning in crisis, and strategic leadership strategies for navigating crises.

INTRODUCTION TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT

In the previous year, news headlines and social media posts featured seemingly daily reports of violent threats, bias incidents, disaster preparation, and criticism of crisis leadership actions. Shootings at military recruitment centers or health clinics disrupt a community's sense of safety, while discrimination charges at universities across the country lead to significant leadership challenges. Organizations may face four types of crisis situations for which response plans must be prepared: sudden (i.e., campus shooting), bizarre (i.e., elevator surfing accident), perceptual (i.e., poor leadership reputation), and smoldering (i.e., ongoing discrimination charges) (Smith, 2002; Jenkins, 2008). While it is virtually impossible for leaders to develop contingency plans and drills for every imaginable disaster, crisis management typically depends more upon the scale of the devastation and leaders' response to it than the actual type of event experienced (Howitt & Leonard, 2006; Jacobson, 2010). Crisis management planning can no longer be a secondary or tertiary priority, but must become a prominent and ongoing activity.

The need for crisis management is not a novel one, but "as our world has become more vulnerable, [organizations] have put time and money into preparing for the unexpected and developing effective procedures to respond to crises" (Harper, 2006, p. 2). Strategic crisis management involves both proactive and reactive responsibilities for potential disaster situations (Harper, Paterson, & Zdziarski, 2006). Proactively, organizations work to prevent disasters or mitigate their impact, as well as plan response strategies in case of emergency. This often includes threat assessment, stakeholder analysis, mental health outreach, community development, emergency operations training, and establishment of a number of policies and procedures for notification and intervention (Zdziarski, 2006; LaBanc, et. al., 2010; Richardson, 2011; Jones, et. al., 2010; Jablonski, 2008). Reactively, institutions move from an initial response to a period of recovery and eventual learning from the event. Reactive tasks include responding to victims and other stakeholders, suspending or arranging alternative services, holding memorial services, providing grief counseling, and eventually reviewing actions that could have prevented or mitigated damage from such situations (Zdziarski, 2006; Richardson, 2011; LaBanc, et. al., 2010; Jablonski, et. al., 2008; Jones, et. al., 2010). Figure 1 shows Zdziarski's model of higher education crisis management, widely accepted as the standard practice by university administrators and other strategic leaders who hold crisis management responsibilities (Zdziarski, 2006, p. 7).

Schools and organizations across the country have adopted similar crisis management models, including a nearly identical model that the U.S. Department of Education uses to train and guide campuses (USDOE, 2009; Richardson, 2011). The traditional model originates from guides found throughout crisis management literature, many of which closely mirror that of the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) (FEMA, 1996; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Zdziarski, 2006; Howitt & Leonard, 2010; Jacobson, 2010; Davison, 2008). The most notable distinction between traditional crisis management models and the one utilized in higher education administration is the inclusion of the learning stage, an unsurprising feature for a profession built upon the ideal of learning from life experiences (Zdziarski, 2006; Richardson, 2011). However, experts insist that it is not enough simply to have a well-grounded emergency operations plan. Once crisis management plans are in place, three criteria determine the success or failure of those plans: widespread acceptance and understanding, inclusivity of all potential

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