





U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Seaman George M. Bell.

Crisis Leadership

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In my various tours in ships and submarines during my Navy career, I learned a few things about leading in crisis situations. Following great leaders, I've fought fires and flooding, got under way to avoid dragging anchor onto the shoals, and participated in emergency breakaways from alongside refueling oilers. Any of these events could have turned into life-or-death crises that were averted by good training and preparation, and by solid leadership.

In my time in senior acquisition positions in Washington, I also have lived through a variety of bureaucratic crises like unexpected budget cuts, reorganizations and downsizing, government shutdowns, and sequestration. None of these were life threatening, but nonetheless created situations where normal processes and procedures didn't apply and leadership was paramount in getting through the crisis. Indeed, I believe there are many parallels between the responses of great crisis leaders I saw aboard ship and those I have witnessed ashore in D.C. There are lessons for all leaders here.

Do the Right Thing

Regardless of the type of crisis, a leader's first responsibility is to assess and stabilize the situation as quickly as possible—that is, focus first on damage assessment and control. In assessing, ask: What is the nature of the crisis and how might it affect the mission, the people, and the organization? Is it controllable or is this something we need to weather?

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My first ship was anchored off the South American harbor of Punta del Este in Uruguay when a sudden squall with extreme winds and high seas began pushing the ship toward shore. The captain and commodore and a third of the crew were ashore, but the executive officer mustered the crew at stations, got the ship under way, and sailed in open ocean through the night. We hadn't been able to foresee the weather change and avert the crisis, we simply had to deal with it. Many of the regular watchstanders were ashore, but we improvised, remained vigilant, and avoided disaster. The current budget downturn, while not threatening to dash the "ship" on the rocks, is a similar crisis, in that it seems unavoidable—so leaders must step up, improvise, remain vigilant, and deal with it.

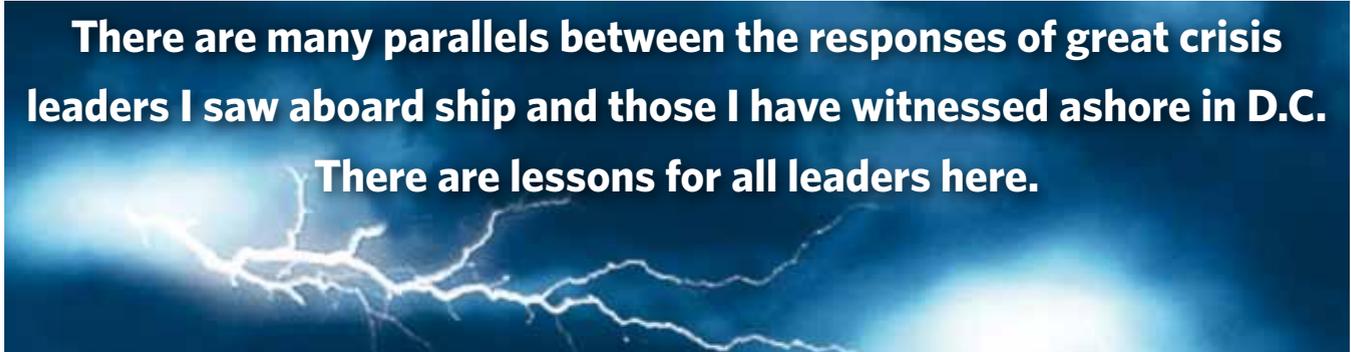
Make no mistake, however: Crisis-driven change is challenging to manage. Existing rules don't apply in the same ways. Workers can become confused, afraid, and, over time, demoralized by the situation. Leaders have to quickly improvise creative solutions to weather the crisis and keep the mission going. They also have to create a clear, positive, and compelling vision of life after the crisis, and encourage others to help move the organization toward that better future. While in the midst of the crisis, leaders who can keep the organization focused on mission and outcome can help others see beyond the immediate chaos, avoid self-doubt and pity, and avert stagnation that results from indecision.

on, we still are struggling to reconstitute a capable acquisition workforce that can effectively manage those inherently governmental functions.

Remain Poised

On submarines, the entire crew is expected to know all the ship's systems and be able to accomplish damage control procedures. When a problem occurs, the senior officer or enlisted man in the damaged compartment is expected to announce to all that he has assumed leadership of the damage control efforts. At that moment, all authority and responsibility for the efforts on the scene are vested in that single leader. Fire or flooding in a submarine is a very serious matter. Indeed, in every crisis, regardless of context or location, stability is disrupted, and people immediately recognize that they can no longer conduct business as usual. Many are swept up in the emotional upheaval and unable to act on their own. In this environment of uncertainty and ambiguity, people look for decisive and poised leaders to provide stability, guidance, and reassurance. In the midst of chaos, a poised leader becomes the calm in the center of the storm.

In one memorable example, I was assigned as a project officer in a naval shipyard. One of the ships in overhaul was defueling, but a misalignment of valves took fuel from tanks in one side of the ship faster than the other. The ship began to list to one



Be Wise

Leaders also must use all their wisdom and foresight to ensure decisions made in the thick of the crisis will not have unintended consequences that may exacerbate the damage or threaten operations after the crisis is over. Many shipboard fires can be extinguished with water, but pumping too much water into the ship can create a whole new set of problems. Likewise, in times of budget drawdowns, leaders must wisely weigh the future impacts of indiscriminately trimming the workforce and cutting training and contracts—changes that may threaten future operations.

The loss of trained and talented individuals and important programs can harm the future of our military capabilities and national security. Once cut, these things are difficult or impossible to reconstitute after the crisis has passed. In the 1990s, for example, the post-Cold War "peace dividend" saw the defense acquisition workforce severely cut back, and many of the responsibilities taken up by defense contractors. Twenty years

side until one of the hull cut openings used to remove equipment dipped below the waterline. The ship began seriously flooding, and, while alert sentries sounded the alarm, most of the shipyard workers and crew stood petrified, watching the disaster unfold. Fortunately, the ship's captain rushed to the scene and quickly assessed the situation. He immediately ordered defueling operations to cease and called for all personnel onboard to move to the opposite side of the ship from the flooding. With the extra weight suddenly shifted away from the opening, the ship's list improved and the hull cut was lifted above the waterline. The captain's decisive, poised, and innovative leadership saved the ship from potentially sinking alongside the pier.

Be Bold

Crises can be viewed either as disruptive and dangerous problems to be solved or as opportunities to create something new and better. Budget drawdowns, for example, are unpleasant periods of disruption where tough and painful decisions have

to be made. Resources are diminished, plans must be modified, and sometimes loyal and dedicated people have to be fired. Too often, leaders view these periods as times to hunker down, try not to be noticed, and preserve as much of the past as possible.

Effective leaders, on the other hand, view crises as “burning platforms” to enable creative change. Reductions in resources require organizations to work smarter, to be more innovative,

smoking and aluminum bulkheads were distorting from the heat. Dozens of the ship’s firefighters were suited up to battle the supposed fire, but no blazes could be found. Suddenly, the senior chief gas turbine technician leaped from his seat in main control and ran from the compartment. Several minutes later, he called to report that he had secured a failed anti-icing valve that had been allowing very high temperature air from the engine to flood the intake shaft. The senior chief earned a medal, the new damage control crew learned a valuable



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and to move away from solving hard problems simply by throwing money or people at them. Bold leaders view these times as opportunities to go beyond simple damage control and look for ways to emerge from the crises stronger, better, and more resilient.

In an unusual tour of duty, I was in charge of operations at a high-energy laser test facility. Funded testing had dropped off significantly, threatening the site’s viability. Rather than despair, we used a portion of the down time to modify the laser’s beam director in order to use it as a high-resolution telescope. We then found opportunities to use it to collect images of missile intercepts high above the range. The fees we collected for those events helped tide us over until new laser business arrived, and we developed a reputation as one of the range’s best imaging sensors. We turned a crisis into an opportunity by being bold and innovative.

Celebrate the Victory

Finally, as the organization emerges from the crisis, leaders should recognize the heroes and celebrate the victory. Crises can be bonding events for individuals and opportunities for organizations to create enormous esprit de corps. Survivors emerge from the crisis stronger, smarter, and “battle hardened.” Further, organizations that capture the lessons learned and capitalize on putting new processes in place will be better prepared for any future crisis. This way, the event becomes a positive learning and growing opportunity with an enduring purpose and legacy. Crises truly are the stuff from which legends are born.

We were less than 2 hours out of the shipyard in our newly commissioned destroyer when fire alarms were called on several decks in compartments surrounding the air intake for one of our gas turbine main propulsion engines. Insulation was

lesson, and the ship sailed successfully after repairs were made. Everyone onboard that day still remembers the crisis and the hero who responded to it.

Conclusion

Crises are times of great angst—and great opportunity. Poised and decisive leaders who step forward to offer innovative solutions to weather the storm will find followers eager to help. Whether a shipboard disaster or a budget drawdown, crises demand both immediate action and a longer view beyond the crisis.

Here is an extreme example from maritime history: In Ernest Shackleton’s now famous exploration mission to the Antarctic, his ship was trapped for months in the ice, during which time he kept his crew members occupied with tasks to keep them alive. He also kept them motivated with the vision and hope that they would get through the crisis and be reunited with their families. After 10 months of being trapped, the ship suddenly was crushed by the thick, heavy ice and sank, adding to the crisis. Yet Shackleton still did not allow his men to give up. Rather, he enlisted the crew to drag the lifeboats miles over the ice to open water, sailed one of the boats to safety, and returned on another ship to rescue the remainder of his crew.

The coming fiscal downturn is clearly not a crisis of the magnitude faced by Shackleton, but it will be confusing, uncomfortable, and difficult for many in the acquisition workforce. Yet it also will be an opportunity to learn, to try new things, and to emerge stronger, leaner, and smarter. We owe it to our warfighters and our country to remain poised, confident leaders through this crisis. 

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