

The Crisis Leadership Playbook

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Keep Your Finger on the Pulse

All organizations have multiple constituencies: employees, shareholders, customers, and more. So one of the first things to do in a crisis is to have your finger on the pulse of each constituency. It's crucial to understand what their needs are — and what their fears are.

That gives you the beginnings of a roadmap for addressing the crisis on their terms, as well as yours. How does the problem at hand affect each constituency? And how can you manage the flow of information to those constituencies so that they have more security, more clarity, and less anxiety?

Communicate Clearly — and Don't Guess

Clarity brings certainty, and certainty lowers anxiety.

Ask yourself how clear you are being in your communications. Are you sending mixed messages? Are you properly defining reality? Are you speculating when you don't have the right information upon which to speculate? Offering opinion instead of facts?

There are many unknowns about the pandemic and its long-term effects. Rather than speculating in the absence of solid information, simply communicate what you know. Lay out the steps you will take today and tomorrow. Keep your eye on the ball, and don't borrow trouble by overthinking about a thousand future variables.

There's a famous scene in the movie *Apollo 13*. Astronaut Jim Lovell and his team are on their way back to Earth from the moon, and their chances of survival are low. One of Lovell's fellow astronauts is feverishly working on some calculations, and he's certain that they're going to ricochet off Earth's atmosphere and be lost forever in space. He's totally freaked out and he starts badgering Lovell about this thing that he thinks he's just figured out. Lovell basically says to him, "Listen, that's step number one thousand. We're on step three. Let's focus on the problem at hand and try to wrestle that to the ground."

Don't Just Announce. Engage.

Most companies are already making sure that their customers know they are on top of the coronavirus crisis, and that's great. But if they would allow themselves to continue that line of thinking and move toward true engagement — asking how their organizations can actually help in their communities, for example — they could raise their connection with their stakeholders to another level.

In other words, don't think about the connection you have with your stakeholders only in terms of, "We're going to tell you what we're doing, and you're going to like the fact that we're on the ball and we're making adjustments to this or adjustments to that."

Instead, solicit a deeper level of engagement. Tell them, “If you have ideas about how we can better serve you, please let us know. If there is an issue that you think our company could help your community address, tell us about it.”

Rather than just telling stakeholders what you’re doing, ask them how your organization can help them accomplish what they need to accomplish during this crisis.

And while you shouldn’t use a crisis as a marketing platform, you *can* use it to communicate something important about your company — especially if your company is doing something for the public good.

Think Ahead

Leading in a crisis is sometimes paradoxical. So, yes, you’ve got to focus your team on the urgent issues directly in front of you, and it’s natural to have an “all hands-on deck” attitude when working through a crisis.

But at some point, the crisis will pass. Will your organization be ready for that moment? Put a few of your bright minds to thinking about where you will be six months from now.

John F. Kennedy once spoke of history as having “no present, only the past rushing into the future.” The future will be here perhaps sooner than you think, and you had best prepare for it. You have to navigate the current circumstance, but also imagine the future.

Stand by Your Core Values

Core values are timeless. And when a crisis hits, an organization that is totally situational — that responds to situations but doesn’t have a clear sense of what it stands for — is in trouble.

What’s more, in the aftermath of the crisis, a company that stood by its values and weathered the storm will be in a better position to attract talent as well as investors and business partners. There are ripple effects when companies don’t just say what they’re going to do, but actually do what they say.

Shut Up and Listen

In or out of a crisis, leaders need to be good listeners. They need humility as well as confidence, listening skills as well as speaking skills.

David Cote, the former CEO of Honeywell, was once asked to recount some of the leadership lessons he’d learned over the course of his career. One of them was, “Your job as a leader is to be right at the end of the meeting, not at the beginning of the meeting.”

Understanding that you can elicit better information and ideas from people by not being overbearing — by listening rather than talking — is key to being a good leader under any circumstances.