

May 25, 2007

Volume 4, No. 5

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Crisis Leadership Reduces Stress and Improves Performance

By Richard Martin

Crises and emergencies are taxing to individuals, groups and organizations. Many people are automatically thrown into a fight-or-flight reaction, and others simply become depressed and passive. Either way, the stress on individuals and groups is significant and can be highly debilitating to performance.

There is a direct relationship between the quality of leadership and the ability of people to function effectively under the stress of crisis conditions. Moreover, a crisis demands highly engaged, dynamic and decisive leadership. While crisis and emergency management can contribute to organizing a plan of action, only *crisis leadership* can provide an adequate level of motivation and cohesiveness to allow the group to function successfully. This has been demonstrated time and again in psychological research, and is a well-known fact for anyone who has led people in emergencies and other life-threatening situations, such as military commanders; firefighters and police officers; and medical trauma specialists.

Six Key Techniques for Handling a Crisis

How can you as a leader help your group or organization cope with the stress and anxiety of a crisis? Here are some techniques that you can use to become a more effective crisis leader.

1. **Take charge of the situation.** This may sound simple, but during a crisis it is one of the most difficult things for a leader to do. Just think of a medical emergency. The critical first step is to take charge of the situation, whether you know anything about first aid or not. People tend to react favorably to direction and decisive leadership in such a situation. Shrinking back from responsibility will only undermine your authority and will lead to diminished respect for you once the crisis has passed. It will also create a chance for increased stress leading to inaction.
2. **Recognize what is happening.** Admit immediately to the gravity of the situation. Don't look to assign blame as it will only create conflict and undermine cohesion and morale. Also, a forensic search for causes is only relevant to the extent that it can contribute to solving the

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Words from the Wise

"I love the man that can smile in trouble; that can gather strength from distress; and grows brave by reflections."

- Thomas Paine

immediate problem. The clearest example of this principle was when James E. Burke, then CEO of Johnson & Johnson, recognized immediately that the Tylenol poisoning scandal in 1982 was a potential nightmare for the company. His willingness to confront the crisis contributed greatly to resolving it humanely and effectively, while maintaining the reputation and integrity of the company.

3. **Confirm information before reacting.** As a military officer taking over command of a highly disputed area in Bosnia, my predecessor gave me two pieces of advice which stood me in good stead for the duration of my deployment:

- Information is always wrong
- Don't overreact

When dealing with information, the *first step* is to identify the source of the information. The *second step* is to ascertain its reliability. The *third step* is to confirm it through observation or trusted report. While this is going on, find a way to plan ahead by considering your options. Involving your team in these steps will go a long way to alleviating the anxiety, which results from uncertainty. Seek to mobilize their minds and hands; busy people have much less energy to fret and start rumors.

4. **Plan ahead.** The ability to plan ahead is critical in any situation, but more so in a crisis or emergency. Before an emergency or crisis, it is important for a leader to mobilize his or her team to consider possible unfavorable or unforeseen scenarios. When a crisis hits, it may not be exactly as imagined, but chances are that the effort spent in considering potential actions will save time and dramatically increase performance under stress. During the crisis, stay on top of the situation by developing various contingency plans, and consider a variety of options before acting. Bringing subordinates into the decision making process can be a valuable strategy, so long as the individuals have requisite know how or information and that time is not an overriding factor.
5. **Care for yourself and for your subordinates.** Caring for oneself as a leader is not selfish. Even in the worst of situations, a leader should wash and change clothes regularly. Regular meals and minimal daily rest are also critical as they provide the fuel to function effectively. Try going 24 hours without sleep and see how your decision making and judgment are hindered. Extending the same consideration to subordinates and people under your care will go a long way to building their self-esteem and self-sufficiency. It will also solidify your reputation as a caring and considerate leader. People willingly make sacrifices for leaders and organizations that treat them with respect and humanity in difficult times.
6. **Effective teamwork depends on morale and cohesion.** There is strength in numbers during a crisis or emergency. Teamwork, cohesion

and morale contribute directly toward individual and group effectiveness during a crisis, and are also known to reduce follower stress and anxiety. The best means of building and maintaining these factors is to create a compelling mission. This provides a rallying point for all the efforts and offers a challenge to the more action-oriented members of the group. Caring for followers and others under the care of the group also creates a focus for improvement and contributes directly to morale and group effectiveness.

The next time you are confronted by an emergency situation or a crisis, begin applying these principles immediately. Even better, apply them now in normal circumstances to become a more transformational and charismatic leader, and to better prepare your team or organization for the inevitable rough spots ahead.

About the Author

Richard Martin is the founder and president of Kingston, Ontario-based Alcera Consulting Inc. He helps excellent executives become world-class leaders by focusing on areas that are ignored or unknown by most mainstream consultants and writers, such as crisis management, crisis leadership, contingency planning, and preparing for chaotic situations. He can be reached by e-mail at Richard.Martin@alcera.ca or by visiting his website at www.alcera.ca.

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