

Human Behaviour and Its Impact on Crisis

One constant through time is crisis, whether it be political, professional, or personal. While no one wants to experience a crisis, it is inevitable. That said, our responses are fully under our control. The examination of the history of crisis leaves us with many lessons learned based on the successes and failures of others.

Any discussion about crisis management should be framed by a definition that solidifies common language. I tend to use the British Standard that states:

An abnormal and unstable situation that threatens the organisation's strategic objectives, reputation, or viability, and which requires a response beyond business as usual.

I am the owner and founder of a crisis management advisory company. Most days I am supporting medium to large organisations before, during and after a crisis. One of the key ingredients to successful navigation during a crisis is preparation and planning. These table stakes include developing a dedicated crisis management program that is regularly exercised. That said, one recurring observation is the impact of human behavior on the outcome of a crisis regardless of industry. I offer the following five (5) human behaviors as areas where an organisation either thrives or flounders during a crisis:

1. PARALYSIS BY ANALYSIS

Day-to-day business allows us the luxury of time to gather maximum information and perform analysis before making a decision. Unfortunately, crisis drives us to make decisions quickly often with imperfect information. Crisis decisions also tend to center around riskier issues making crisis management team (CMT) members want even more time than normal to arrive at a decision. CMT members that adapt their decision-making style and accept more risk while in crisis mode will not fall prey to this paralysis pitfall.

There is often a temptation to wait a situation out, hoping that an issue will go away. This rarely works and the lost time often amplifies the gravity of the crisis. This should not be confused with a conscious decision not to conduct a certain

action right away. There may be very valid reasons for waiting to perform a certain action. This is fine if it was a conscious and deliberate decision and not wishful thinking driving the inaction.

2. GROUP THINK

I have been lucky enough to work for some great leaders who were also charismatic. Everybody on the team loved them and they always knew what to do! There are corporate cultures where it is frowned upon or career limiting to disagree with any leader further up the organisational ladder. If you are that awesome leader or work in the aforementioned culture, you must be wary of group think. A leader or senior individual raises an idea and instantly it is the greatest thought ever. While it might feel good to have your team always agree with all your ideas, this atmosphere agitates directly against creative thought which is often needed to guide an organisation out of crisis. It is imperative that all CMT members have a voice and feel 100% comfortable tabling a new idea or questioning something that someone else has put forward. This challenge function is critical in ensuring an organisation is using its “collective brain” to resolve an issue.

A quick caveat on the challenge function – this is not an invitation towards endless debate or fiercely advocating a position. When there is time and opportunity, a CMT should invite healthy cognitive debate but as deadlines loom, it is imperative to eventually “pull the trigger” and move forward with a decided course of action.

3. BLAME GAME

When an organisation finds itself in crisis mode, it is often tempting to seek who or what department is at fault. Leaders and departments should be held accountable for their actions and decisions yet determining root cause or punitive actions during the crisis is counter-productive unless they are necessary to inform future decisions within that crisis.

This issue can also raise its ugly head when a novel approach that was put forward by a CMT member was trialed but with negative results. Again, directing blame towards this team member risks alienating them for the remainder of the crisis and destroys any psychological safety that may have existed within the team. At the end of the day, the crisis team leader is accountable for the team's decisions, not the members themselves.

Finally, team leaders need to understand there are going to be mistakes, especially due to the time compression and imperfect information available when making decisions. It is important to understand that a mistake has been made but beating oneself up about it risks distracting everyone from the task at hand – moving the organisation out of crisis. There will be plenty of time during the after action or hotwash to discuss mistakes and remediations for future crises.

4. FOLLOWERSHIP

When building your crisis management team, you want your best leaders from your various organisational departments. What happens when you put most of your best leaders in one room? Assuming there is a crisis management plan that stipulates a crisis management team leader to guide the team, it is not always comfortable for some leaders to not be “in charge”. Teams that thrive through crisis are blessed with leaders who can bring their “A” game as a crisis team member by following the designated leader and providing their full support. Followership is not blindly following a leader. A good follower is bringing their perspectives towards creative solutions to the crisis and challenging other perspectives. That said, once a CMT has decided on a direction, a good follower is 100% committed to supporting that decision, especially if it was not a direction that they thought the team should be heading.

5. LEADERSHIP

I am often asked what the secret is to successfully navigating a crisis. I used to talk about structuring a crisis management program, supported by strong

planning and training. These are still truths today, but the best response is “leadership under stress”. If your organisation has strong leaders that are comfortable with sudden change, can make time compressed decisions and fully harness the collective mind of the CMT, they are already far more resilient. It might not be unicorns and rainbows when crisis strikes, but the organisation will spend less time in crisis mode, mitigating the impact of the crisis.

When developing crisis team leader candidates for a CMT, there is a natural temptation to select the most senior or ranked person for this role. There are different styles of leadership, and some great leaders may not be the best fit to lead during crisis. It is critical that crisis leaders be selected against the above noted criteria, trained for the role with realistic scenarios and most importantly enjoy the trust of their organisation during a crisis.

Crisis management is crisis leadership!

As previously mentioned, resilient organisations should have strong crisis management programs, supported by planning and training. This should always be the target, yet many organisations’ crisis management programs mature at varying rates. Whether your organisation enjoys the best crisis management program ever conceived or struggles with a nascent capability, these five (5) human behaviors are easy targets for an organisation. Awareness of the pitfalls and desired traits will always lead to more positive outcomes during crisis.