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Leading Through Crisis

Skills and Professional Development





There are few of us who will get through this life without encountering a crisis or two along the way. The same is likely true in our careers. Whether there is trouble on the corporate level or within our internal departments, there will come a time when we will be tested.

The good news is that while the details of the challenge may change, the basic processes of managing and surviving or, better yet, thriving during the crisis remain essentially the same. So the fact that we've endured one crisis makes us better prepared to endure the subsequent ones.

Being a leader is about what we do on a daily basis. However, the world tends to judge us on how we manage and lead through crises. So now, while things are calm, is the time to develop the skills and mindset you'll need to not just lead during the next crisis, but to do so masterfully.

Here are 10 steps that should be a part of every crisis management process.

Manage the crisis

1. **Get the facts** — You would think this is a no-brainer. However, more often than you'd think, decisions are made without knowing all the facts on the ground. Without a clear understanding of what is happening, actions might end up being counterproductive.

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2. **Accept reality** — Nothing is worse than pretending like the crisis isn't happening. Because those around you can see the truth, it is vital to accept the truth of the moment and then deal with it. When we accept reality, it allows us to get perspective and realize that as bad as things may seem, they could always be worse. If we face the fact that litigation is on the table, we can take a step back and see that means we still have a path forward.
 3. **Assume responsibility and control** — In every situation (especially stressful ones), your troops are looking for someone to take responsibility and control. In a crisis, the person who doesn't look to scapegoat others is the one who has the ability to instill confidence in those looking for assurance that everything will be alright.
 4. **Communicate constantly and consistently** — One of the best ways to ensure trust from those we lead is to communicate with them honestly and in a timely manner. We don't have to communicate what we don't know, but also acknowledging that we don't have all the answers right now goes a long way toward maintaining trust. People want to know what's going on and they are looking to their leaders for answers. So provide them with what you know.
 5. **Trust your ability** — Just as we want those we lead to trust us, we have to trust ourselves. By being as prepared as possible or drawing upon our previous successes, we should be able to trust in our own abilities to face current, or future, crises.
 6. **Make a plan** — One of the best ways to deal with crises, challenges, or obstacles is to have a plan. Knowing we have a roadmap provides us with confidence, and it takes a lot of the guesswork out of what to do next. As part of the plan, it is necessary to identify any constraints that we face. Then we have to be willing to unleash our creativity and be flexible as we maneuver to the end goal. While we have a plan, we cannot be afraid to deviate from it if it's not helping us get to the desired outcome. Being decisive is good for our self-confidence and shows leadership to others. And where possible and necessary, the plan should include opportunities to delegate actions and decisions to others, so that leaders can concentrate on the big picture.

Focus on the future

7. **Perceive opportunity** — Crises, when viewed optimistically, are opportunities. The goal shouldn't be to take advantage of people or situations, but crises can provide a chance to change the status quo for the better.
8. **Practice self-care** — We should never forget that whatever is going on will, at some point, come to an end. Because that is the case, we should not spend time beating ourselves up because we encountered a crisis. We have to extend ourselves grace and make sure we take care of ourselves so we can move on when the storm has subsided.
9. **Move forward confidently** — If we gain nothing else from our times of crisis, we should walk away more confident than when the crisis began. One of our goals should be to learn through the process and accept that we are resilient and capable of navigating a multitude of issues.

Prevent Future Crises

10. **Think ahead and develop a contingency plan** — Finally, where possible, crises should not be the result of a failure of imagination. We are in positions of leadership for a reason, one of which is to anticipate storms and have a plan of action to navigate smoothly through them.

By taking steps before something happens, we can minimize the times we find ourselves in crisis. But as crises will inevitably happen, we can rest assured that with proper planning and a thought-out

process, we can get through anything that comes our way.

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Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the Lead the Way column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.

