If you lead, you will face a crisis. Of all the demands made on leaders, crisis leadership is probably the most challenging, and it is the one they are least prepared to handle properly due to lack of experience and skills. While thinking ahead about how to respond in a crisis can help, it really comes down to whether each leader’s personal experience has equipped them with the right level of fortitude and courage to take an organization through such an event, especially given the highly unpredictable nature of crises. The central premise presented in this article is that each leader can gain valuable experience and learn from his or her own crucible moments, and that this will in turn help them become more confident crisis leaders.

Tips for leaders on acquiring the traits and building the skills needed to succeed in crisis leadership.

BY STEVEN J. BELL
When leaders have crucible moments, no matter how things turn out, they learn from those experiences. The ideas and strategies introduced here are meant to assist you with the acquisition of crisis leadership skills, skills that will even help prepare you for the more contemporary “dark times” crises that we are experiencing in the digital age.

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mental preparation and learning from the lessons of great crisis leadership. Once enlightened by having experienced their own personal crucible moments, library leaders should be well positioned to deal with any crisis life throws their way.

Learning from Crucible Moments
Crisis situations and crucible moments happen when you least expect them. What seems routine and normal can suddenly spiral into threat of safety and chaos. This is the nature of crucible moments. While we are unable to control them, what we learn from them leads to better crisis leadership. History is rich with stories of leaders who guided others through a time of crisis. Graham Allison’s *The Essence of Decision* is the classic analysis of the Cuban missile crisis, and it provides leaders with valuable insight into how decisions are made in times of crisis. Few leaders will ever face a crisis of such proportion, but they may have their own personal versions of the missile crisis. Take an unexpected tumultuous event, add considerable ambiguity, differing opinions on what to do, and a measure of personal indecision, and you suddenly have your own missile crisis-like crucible moment.

A crucible moment is an event that presents a significant challenge to leaders. While such events are typically associated with an unfortunate experience, leaders may find that, in the aftermath of their crucible moments, they bring forth an epiphany of sorts, perhaps even a revelation that results in a life-changing transformation. The crucible moment concept originates from stories of the medieval alchemist, subjecting metals and minerals to the intense heat of the crucible in order to create a transformation. Something akin to this happens on our path to leadership. Aspiring leaders are put into challenging situations, their own crucibles, and through the intense challenges of those moments they are transformed, hopefully for the better, because what they learn from these experiences puts them on the path to remarkable leadership. In their seminal *Harvard Business Review* article “Crucibles of Leadership,” Warren Bennis and Robert J. Thomas examine just how such crucible moments have shaped leadership. (View the article at bit.ly/ND18HBRleadership.)

The Crucible and the Crisis
As global crises continue to be part of our regular news cycle, there are plenty of examples of leaders fumbling and bumbling with crisis situations—and even compounding the crisis. In contrast, when Senator Cory Booker was the mayor of Newark, his response after a blizzard was to take personal responsibility for supervising the snow removal teams. He helped citizens shovel their cars out of snow, delivered essential supplies to shut-ins, and then used social media to share his first-hand observations and to let residents see that a leader was in charge and demonstrating control of the situation. This example and others provide some suggestions for how leaders can react in a crisis. Above all, leaders should possess the following traits and skill sets to effectively lead during times of crisis:
Keep Calm and Assess: Leaders need to reassure staff and their superiors that they are in charge and have a clear understanding of the nature of the crisis. Not only do they need good information gathering, using a variety of sources, such as assembling staff who may have more information and unique insights, but they also need to be able to interpret the information in order to assess what’s happening—this is also the first step in deciding how to act or respond.

Act Quickly, but Not Too Quickly: Leaders need to take action—that means making decisions about how to react to the situation. In the Cuban missile crisis, President John F. Kennedy was pushed by some of his more hawkish advisers to take military action. Rather than reacting quickly, he slowed things down a bit to consider multiple responses. Slowing down also allowed him to obtain more information and reassess the situation. To bolster your staff’s confidence in you as a leader, slow down a bit to avoid coming across as nervous or confused.

Establish Lines of Communication: Routine, clear communication is a core quality of effective leadership. Established lines of communication with staff are even more critical in a crisis where transparent leaders can make a difference. Effective leaders will put multiple, reliable channels of communication into place well ahead of a crisis. Whatever mediums are used, be it a blog, podcast, or texting network, they establish the lines of communication. Gain transparency by acknowledging the situation.

Manage Expectations Realistically: Even when a leader communicates what they know about the situation, or at much information as the leader feels they can comfortably share, it’s best to anticipate that some staff will still express dismay and alarm. After determining the magnitude of the crisis situation, leaders can provide a realistic expectation of likely next steps on the road to recovery, as well as a timeframe for a return to normalcy.

Demonstrate Control: In non-crisis leadership, the ability to relinquish control and allow subordinates to have autonomy contributes to a healthy organization. In a crisis situation, staff want to know that their leader is in control. Leaders need to bring stability by taking action, assigning tasks, and committing resources to damage control. Leaders should strive for a decisiveness that communicates they are in control and working to resolve the crisis.

Be Flexible: During a crisis, leaders must quickly adapt their strategies as events unfold. The crisis response that appeared appropriate at first may prove inadequate or totally wrong as the situation changes or new information comes to light. Leaders need to acknowledge they won’t have all the answers. Flexible crisis leaders consult with subordinates and allow them to contribute to the crisis response. A leader should set the direction, but enlisting others to get through a crisis allows for greater flexibility.

Leading Through a Dark Times Crisis

There is a new type of crisis that leaders must deal with. Typically external to the organization—for example, global terror attacks, mass shootings, senseless violence, or catastrophic disasters—these shocking and unexpected crises lead to damage in ways that are less visible to leaders. In the Harvard Business Review article “Being a Good Boss in Dark Times” (view the article at bit.ly/ND18HBRdark), author Jennifer Porter refers to these as “dark times” crises. These events contribute to heightened levels of stress, volatility, and uncertainty among workers. The result is new workplace challenges for which leaders are less prepared to respond. Many leaders struggle with this personally. Finding the right words or appropriate response is hard.

How can leaders best respond in a dark times crisis? During his two terms in office, President Barack Obama repeatedly demonstrated what great leaders do in times of crisis. As each terrible act of domestic or foreign violence unfolded, the President served as healer-in-chief. His presence in leading the country through difficult times gave...
reassurance that our world was far from spiraling out of control and that we would weather each crisis, working together to find the way to better times.

In the same article, Jennifer Porter offers recommendations for responding to a dark times crisis, which are summarized below:

- **Acknowledge Your Own Emotions:** Leaders who are able to share their personal feelings of shock, sadness, or numbness during a dark times crisis will help colleagues address their own feelings. Past advice was to keep emotions out of the workplace. Contemporary leaders need to understand it is acceptable to acknowledge one’s own emotions during these difficult times.

- **Speak from the Heart:** Accept that your words or actions will likely cause some discomfort, and that whatever you do or say will be far from perfect, and that’s normal and acceptable. Speaking from the heart is far more powerful than finding the perfect words to speak.

- **Create a Psychological Safety Zone:** Create a workplace safety zone, physical or virtual, where workers feel comfortable asking each other how they feel about what happened. No one should worry that they will be ridiculed or embarrassed by speaking freely.

- **Channel Emotions into a Stronger Organization:** Rather than feel despondent or hopeless about the future after tragedy strikes, reframe those emotions and channel them into a stronger resolve to build a resilient organization capable of supporting workers’ emotional needs.

- **Allow Time for Emotional Processing:** Place a momentary hold on business and shift conversations to more difficult topics. Yes, we all have important work to attend to in our organizations, but in the wake of a dark times crisis, our daily routines and deadlines are less important than giving ourselves time to share what really matters.

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The unpredictable nature of crises makes them virtually impossible to adequately prepare for in advance. While leadership education may offer some help with preparation, leaders should know that the only way to truly fail in a crisis is to do absolutely nothing.

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**Reflecting on Crucible Moments**

No one who aspires to lead can accurately anticipate times of crisis or how they will deal with their own crucible moments. The unpredictable nature of crises makes them virtually impossible to adequately prepare for in advance. While leadership education may offer some help with preparation, leaders should know that the only way to truly fail in a crisis is to do absolutely nothing. Whatever response a leader makes, the outcome is likely to be better if they have studied crisis leadership and are aware of strategies for anticipating, weathering, and recovering from a crisis. Leaders may lament their crucible moments, but those who use them as sources of learning and reflection truly transform themselves into leaders who can weather crises with confidence.

Leaders may wish to remember that, according to Jennifer Porter, leadership is about much more than strategic planning and operational excellence. She writes, “A leader sets the emotional tone and example—in good times and perhaps more importantly in bad.” When times are bad, leaders transformed by their crucible moments will face each crisis ready to get that emotional tone just right.

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