

Leading in Times of Crisis

By: Dr. Martin D. Cohen

One of the most striking aspects of consulting to business and industry we have found is how unprepared so many organizations are for a major crisis. We understand it – it's our human nature to pay attention to what's in front of us, rather than to what is way out of sight and probably not going to happen anyway. Plus there are the myriad minor crises that pop up almost every day that also demand our attention; and then there are all those phone calls, meetings, e-mails, people at your door, deadlines, reports, ... you know what I'm talking about.

And yet, the costs involved for planning and training in advance are a small fraction of the costs of not being prepared should the worst case scenario emerge. Whether it's a natural disaster like a hurricane or flood, an accident, a death, a product failure, internal fraud, sabotage, or executive misconduct – all events we have seen in the news recently -- it's important to allocate the resources to plan and prepare. Generally, the cost for planning, just in case, is nothing more than a few hours a few times a year to create and practice the process that will take place in the event things go wrong.

A crisis doesn't have to be as serious as a hurricane Katrina or Andrew, an Enron collapse, or the Tylenol tampering of the 80's, to be a crisis that if mismanaged, could affect your company's reputation and marketability. The after-shocks of a crisis on your employees also can last for years if mishandled. Unfortunately, many people in leadership positions think they need to delay or spin the facts -- to avoid blame usually — even when there is no fault. Despite all the anecdotal evidence and the handbook being really clear on this subject, some bosses still don't get it: communicate what you know, when you learned it, how you learned it, and what you're going to do to fix it as quickly as possible. Tell the truth, don't spin it, because the facts are bound to come out eventually anyway and people have long memories when it comes to such things.

Crisis leadership from the top

There are a number of factors that help people in an organization going thru a crisis cope better, and they all flow from good leadership. People in crisis tend to be confused, anxious and highly suggestible. And so, it's important to **inform** folks – staff, customers, vendors, and the community, if your crisis impacts them– about what you know and what you don't yet know. It's also important to **direct** folks, to give guidance as to how they should conduct themselves under the current crisis circumstances.

There are also other tasks of crisis leadership; there's "emotional leadership". People in crisis need more than just information; rationality doesn't convince people, emotional resonance does.

Great leaders, especially in times of crisis, move us; and that always involves a relationship. So, what would a great leader do in a crisis beyond giving information and direction? He or she would help **manage expectations, touch** us, and **inspire** us.

As a leader, one can help people in crisis manage their expectations by conveying, for example, that within what is possible, the very best is being done. Messages such as this will help people maintain perspective and tolerate uncertainty longer.

Competent emotional leadership also speaks to and about shared values, those things that bind us as a company or as a community. When we remind people what we are about, we inspire them to function at their best. And in order to do all these things, a leader has to be highly visible and visible often. She or he needs to have the courage to be intimate with their own reactions and those of the people around them, so people feel touched, cared about, and in relationship.

Your company will probably never have a crisis as severe as that of Mayor Rudy Giuliani of New York on September 11, 2001, a leader who is almost universally admired for his handling of that crisis. Even under that extreme duress, he was able to exemplify those qualities that help people cope better during times of crisis: he stayed calm but not dispassionate or disinterested. He stayed visible, and he was as close to the scene of the tragedy as he could be. He communicated what he knew to be accurate information as soon as he knew it. And he made sure that there was a steady stream of communications from his chiefs of fire and police. He gave the people of New York, and the people of the entire country, the sense that as dreadful as this event was, their leadership was functional, in control, and dealing with events as they unfolded.

Effective crisis leadership requires the same level of planning and commitment as good acquisitions strategy, product development, HR, marketing, and all the other key components that make a company successful. Create a play book, with expert, outside consulting if necessary; practice it, determine who will speak for the company and be prepared for the worst that can happen. And don't forget that whoever in senior management is going to speak, they have to be prepared, and that requires coaching and practice on a regular basis.

Traumatic Incident Stress

Some crises are traumatic for people. The effects that a traumatic event can have on employees are the most difficult to ameliorate – data can be backed up, computers rebooted, equipment can be replaced, roofs and walls can be rebuilt – but your people need psychological safety to be reestablished; they need to talk and emote. Many will experience emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and even spiritual reactions in response to the stress of “critical incidents”. This is where the Behavioral Health technology of Critical Incident Stress Management comes in.

The first step is to understand that reactions to a critical incident may not always be universal. Several people may witness a tragic event and have different reactions based on a number of factors. These factors might include past exposures to trauma, coping skills, support systems and pre-existing beliefs. This is why sometimes an event that one might think is critical turns out not to have a significant impact while another event evokes a completely different set of reactions.

With that being said it becomes clear why a thorough assessment by trained individuals is so valuable.

Most people exposed to a traumatic event will experience some symptoms for a short period of time, days to weeks. The most common phrase used by professional Traumatologists to explain this reaction is that “people are having a normal reaction to abnormal events”. This simple phrase normalizes predictable reactions and restores a sense of community among the witnesses of trauma. In other words, people see their own reactions play out in others and realize that they are not alone or losing their minds.

Often those in leadership positions feel a sense of obligation and responsibility to directly assist their people and this can prove to be ineffective for many unforeseen reasons. Often employees want to show the “boss” that they can handle it, maybe because they fear losing credibility or because they are coming up for promotion. Sometimes it’s the opposite; an employee can become extremely needy and play on the boss’ sympathy. Or, the “boss” might be directly affected by the incident. It is difficult to remain objective in times of crises because of so many dynamic influences and variables matched with little control.

An organization with strong leadership understands the importance of knowing where to find the appropriate resources in a timely fashion when you need them. Traumatic events are not usually a topic most organizations want to deal with proactively but the reality of trauma or disaster affecting the workplace and the lawsuits that are focusing on “standard of care” issues with regard to preparedness plans for critical incidents, mean that the topic can no longer be ignored. Every organization needs to prepare for dealing with traumatic events by preplanning, training and securing the appropriate resources in advance. That way a timely response can be achieved. One thing that is clear, the sooner the event is acknowledged and dealt with the sooner people and the organization will heal and move forward.

About the Author

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