



BY CHIEF JIM BROMAN

Leading in Crisis

Mastering 5 key skills can help you adapt to any situation

In the 21st century, our nation and our world have been embroiled in a series of unsettling and often frightening crises.

Earlier this century, the dot-com bust ushered in an era of persistent economic uncertainty. Between 1999 and 2007, the Dow Jones average rocketed between record highs and extreme lows. Low interest rates created a bubble in the housing market, which had become a major driver of economic growth. When this bubble burst, our economic struggle became a global malaise.

There have also been challenges beyond economics. The 2001 terrorist attacks, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and humanitarian crises have all made crisis seem almost routine.

These challenges seep into our lives and the work we do. The fire service is not exempt from the fallout; many agencies face severe budget limits and consequential layoffs of essential service personnel.

THE WAY WE WERE

Effective leadership is vital for emergency services' success in the best of times; in crises, it's even more important. Employees and citizens look to their leaders for explanations or solutions in times of crisis or great change.

Their voices call for a return to normal: "Let's just go back to the way it was!" But is returning to status quo the best course for the community, the organization or the leaders? Often not. With the volume and speed of change in our world, leaders can't turn back. We can't waste resources in the futile attempt to recreate a past state.

BALANCED LEADERSHIP

Crisis management demands an examination of priorities, relationships and values. Leaders must recognize the origins of the crisis, take action to weather the immediate storm, and then challenge the group they lead to sort out what matters most.

Too often we try to work harder, to do more with less. But stretching ourselves too thin only keeps us facing more constraints. Leaders must find new

meaning or new methods, even in the midst of severe stress, to work effectively. In this environment, there's no script or formula for success.

The basis of this article comes from a 2001 report of The Aspen Institute's Business and Society Program entitled, "Balanced Leadership During Turbulence and Crisis." Co-located in Washington, D.C., and Aspen, Colo., the Institute promotes values-based leadership and balanced discussion.

To discover meaning and capacity in the midst of crises, we need skills and perspectives not found in current curricula. Leaders at the Aspen Institute drew upon collective insights to articulate five areas of necessary development for leaders: communication, multiple perspectives, living your values, knowing yourself and hard choices.

The report also noted that current educational systems fall short in these areas, meaning that substantial work remains for us to properly equip leaders to deal with crisis leadership. Let's take a closer look at each of these areas.

COMMUNICATION

Not surprisingly, communication is the premier skill, and what's required isn't merely rhetorical ability. Honing this skill requires honesty and active listening. Leaders fail when they assume their audience can't handle the truth; they may try to sugarcoat the information to minimize fear and avoid panic. Tell the truth—the facts as you know them—in a voice without drama or hyperbole.

Genuine listening coupled with honest dialogue engages and reassures both colleagues and the community. The Aspen report noted that senior managers mistakenly "talk at people rather than listen to them," in an attempt to display strength.

Also, consider two cautions included in the report. During a crisis, the "decibel level" of discussions tends to elevate. Don't overlook a quiet but important voice amidst the noise. In addition, strive to include a diverse set of voices in the dialogue, even those that might irritate.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

American author F. Scott Fitzgerald stated, “The test of first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” Leaders must develop the ability to accommodate multiple perspectives in their deliberations, (e.g., differing priorities among citizens, elected officials, business persons, regulators and employees).

In focusing on only one perspective, you risk significant consequences. Aspen leaders asked, “Does the single-minded pursuit of shareholder value create wealth for all—or produce social inequity? Did it contribute to our current economic storm?”

Similarly, we might ask, “Will a single-minded pursuit of fire prevention strategies produce a safe community—or do the multiple perspectives of prevention *and* response better serve leaders?”

How do you develop the ability to understand and incorporate multiple perspectives? There’s no clear strategy or regimen. The best way to start is to ask questions of people and groups to determine how they view the issue. Spend time gathering multiple perspectives before reacting to crises.

LIVING YOUR VALUES

Values influence our decisions, but whose values apply at work? Fire departments develop and publish behavioral norms, typically called *values*, intended to inform tactical and strategic decisions. But simply adopting and publishing a list of desired organizational values does nothing to ensure they will show up in the daily choices of those around you.

Effective leaders conscientiously commit to live these values. Scarce resources limit our ability to teach values in a classroom setting, but don’t underestimate the power of a consistent role model. If you value honesty, weed out every element of dishonesty in your words and actions. Saying that you value safety is important, but words alone don’t match the power of your actions.

Times of crisis drive us to react according to our real values. Choose yours wisely and live them faithfully.

KNOW YOURSELF

The *Harvard Business Review*, in a 2001 special issue on leadership, posits that self-knowledge is “leadership’s First Commandment.” Self-knowledge encompasses social and emotional skills that equip you to manage your own emotions, even the distressing ones, which leads to the ability to empathize and collaborate. In the midst of a crisis, leaders must manage, not suppress, their own emotions to build confidence in their stability.

The Aspen Institute concluded that although many professionals recognize the importance of self-knowledge, leadership education rarely succeeds in training us how to develop it. Although there’s no

clear recipe for success, resources do exist, such as Daniel Goleman’s books on emotional intelligence.

REALITY: HARD CHOICES

Leadership programs regularly discuss the methodologies and challenges associated with good decisions. Lurking in the real world, however, are hard choices—sometimes tragic choices—leaders must make, especially in times of crises.

Our current economic storm drove many fire agencies to the point of making critical service cuts and personnel reductions; as a result, someone could possibly be injured because of the depleted resources. Although these circumstances can breed an out-of-control climate in our service environments, leaders must not give up the right and duty to make good choices. We must steer the best course through unappealing territory.

Have we properly prepared our leaders to make these decisions despite crisis? The answer again, in most cases, is “no.” We have much to accomplish to improve our development process and skill sets. Meanwhile, consider the following suggestions: Describe the challenge before you and invite open discussion on the response choices; focus on the value to be gained rather than the loss; and reach out to your mentors and peers for counsel and support.

CONCLUSION

The turbulent early years of this century compel us to reexamine our leadership skills and perspectives. But without a navigation chart, the journey through crisis can be intimidating and lonely. Although troubling, crisis actually frees us to explore new ways of thinking—an Aspen Institute participant termed it “the wisdom of the funeral.”

Our greatest risk is that we actually get back to “normal.” Rather, we should explore new possibilities and learn to adapt. As our new approach succeeds and the crisis eases, we can’t relax. We must enhance our efforts to equip leaders with the skills and perspectives to navigate the boiling waters of our next crisis. *

REFERENCES

- ¹ “Balanced Leadership During Turbulence and Crisis,” November 2001, www.aspeninstitute.org/atf/cf/%7bdeb6f227-659b-4ec8-8f84-8df23ca704f5%7d/balance2001summary.pdf



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