

Crisis Leadership Demands Bold Action

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Throughout history there have been inflection points that have tested the ability of governments to meet challenges and resolve issues for the greater good of their citizens. However, seldom has there been a convergence of multiple crises such as a global pandemic, economic upheaval, civil unrest due to social inequity and environmental instability due to climate change. In addition, all of this is occurring against a backdrop of transition of power between government administrations. It is during times like this that strong, compassionate leadership is even more critical. In actuality, it is in times of crisis that there is the opportunity to accelerate necessary change that was already underway.

Those leaders that rise to the occasion tend to display common traits and characteristics and take bold action during crisis management. These characteristics include aspiring to create a greater good and inspiring those they lead and serve. Great leaders display constant curiosity and embrace lifelong learning. They want to solve problems.

Before the Storm

Long before the storm gathers, great leaders aspire to embrace the art of the possible and set a vision that pushes us beyond existing boundaries. Robert F. Kennedy once said “Some men see things as they are and say why. I dream things

that never were and say why not.” Great leaders connect the dots and make their vision come to life. They articulate the vision in a manner that will inspire others to see themselves and their individual contributions in that vision and in the ultimate outcome. Leaders know their own strengths and weaknesses and surround themselves with people who have complementary skills, recognizing the advantages of good counsel and the strength of a team. They invest in employees, providing training to develop individuals and team training to enhance the ability of individuals to behave as a unified operating entity. They invest in scenario planning to build

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the muscle movements of the organization so rapid response can be achieved. Finally, they invest in the infrastructure and tools necessary for execution. This type of preparation provides the most effective insurance policy against a bad outcome in the event of a worst-case scenario.

These leaders understand that risk is reality, but they are seldom deterred by risk. They are optimistic and confident enough to move forward, even without perfect information. It is a delicate dance to balance risk and reward over time. They co-create the vision with the community that they serve, always asking for the identification of improvements, especially from those closest to the front line whether they

Continued on page 29

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Previously, Margie served as the Deputy CIO at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). As the Deputy CIO, she had oversight of an IT portfolio of \$5.4 billion in programs. In addition, she managed the operations of the Office of the Chief Information Officer, covering the functional areas of Applied Technology, Enterprise Architecture, Data Management, IT Security, Infrastructure Operations, IT Accessibility, Budget and Acquisition.

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be citizens receiving services, or employees delivering the mission.

In the Eye of the Storm

The best leaders have a natural curiosity and the penchant for solving problems, trying solutions, and discerning the impact in real time. They never have complete information, but they take action and adjust the approach after observing the impact of each decision and as more data is available. This requires constant vigilance as the crisis unfolds.

Once a crisis occurs, vision and preparation translate into action and rapid decision making. Scenario planning and training prepare effective leaders for any crisis they may encounter.

In the midst of crisis response, great leaders are even more accessible and accountable to their constituents than during normal operations. The sharing of information ensures that everyone is working with the same situational awareness. This doesn't mean the constant sharing of raw data, but rather of the curated information with conclusions and reasoning that are easy to follow and digest. Executives at all levels of the organization must make "on demand" decisions, but there will be times when escalation is needed. Great leaders are accessible for conferencing during those times and give their executives the confidence that their decisions are backed by the organization as they respond and execute their mission. Great leaders praise and encourage employees during the response and are a visible inspiration through the long days and nights.

After the Storm

Great leaders take stock of what worked and what didn't work. They refuse to return to the status quo and become complacent or acquiesce to the tyranny of the present. If there is no learning, then organizations will move from crisis to crisis without legitimate improvement. Effective leaders don't put the after-action report on the shelf. They follow through and imbed the necessary changes to ensure that the organization will not be destined to make the same mistakes twice, travel over old ground or waste time.

Praise and thanks for all partners who responded and continue to perform the mission are also key once the organization returns to equilibrium. Those bonds that are forged between individuals, organizations, partners, stakeholders, and constituents during a crisis are all that much stronger for having weathered the storm together.

Conclusion

All of the principles of leadership in action described in this narrative were and are being illustrated in real life during the COVID crisis. We witnessed amazing responses and resiliency during the prolonged response. In addition, we recognized profound flaws resident in the ecosystem that need to be addressed both immediately and in the longer term. Some examples follow:

Elements of the National Response Plan (NRP) were executed, activating FEMA and the National Guard to augment the frontline work of medical first responders. This would not have been possible without the existence of the NRP and the National Level Exercise that occurs every two years to train personnel in their responsibilities.

Pharmaceutical companies exchanged information and worked together to develop effective vaccines while the FDA broke through barriers of bureaucracy to facilitate speed to market without sacrificing efficacy and safety.

The transportation and shipping industries transformed and scaled their operations to meet demand for contactless, home deliveries. Grocery stores did the same.

Commercial technology companies offered compute power and innovative approaches to support the pivot to remote work for businesses and government. Emerging technologies were used to assist in medical research for vaccine development, to identify the most promising therapeutic remedies and to develop logistics models for vaccine distribution.

Despite these bright spots of cooperation and success, the pandemic response also surfaced gaps and flaws in supply chain, processes and procedures and the interaction between the federal government, state and local government and commercial enterprises. These are just a few of the areas that must be addressed and improved as events continue to unfold.

The best leaders will be at the forefront, shining a light on the path forward. ■