

What's a Leader To Do?

The events of September 11th will spark conversations far into the future. “Where were you when you heard?” “Did you lose anyone in the crashes?” “Were you out of town? How did you get home?” “What did you do?” At kitchen tables, across airplane aisles, and during business meeting breaks, these questions will be asked and answered.

Leaders especially, need to be ready to answer the “What did you do?” question. Leadership, critical for success at the best of times, is a matter of survival during crisis. During crisis, the leader's job is simple – they need to lead. In normal times, leading is a complex task; in crisis leading becomes dramatically simple. There are three main responsibilities – leaders must be visible, leaders must be the conduit for information, and leaders must be open to emotion – their own as well as the emotions of those they lead.

Leaders must be seen

When a crisis happens, a leader's first concern must be the safety of their people and the potential danger from panic. When a leader becomes physically visible, either in person, via voice transmittal, or in any way technology allows, and provides clear direction about immediate actions, anxiety levels drop significantly and immediately. “Exit the building.” “Stay home for the next 3 days.” “Check email for hourly updates.” Visibility tied with requests for specific action calms.

Immediate actions are usually easy to determine and express. Leaders are trained to be out front with requests for actions. This isn't the hard part. It's after the metaphoric smoke has cleared and the on-going crisis needs to be managed that leaders often falter. They convince themselves that their presence isn't necessary, people don't need to see them, and results are what are important. Listen to the comments made by a New York firefighter as he talked about the visibility of the New York Fire Commissioner, “Symbols are bigger than you can imagine.”

Leaders must provide information

It is dangerous for a leader to believe the old expression, *no news is good news*. Replace it immediately with the following, *no news is no news*. A leader needs to have a fundamental belief in the importance of keeping their people informed in normal times and a passionate belief in the importance of keeping their people informed during times of crisis. Leaders need to share what they know when it is appropriate, inform people when there is information that cannot be shared, and explain why there is no information when there isn't any.

I have never encountered an employee who's complained about getting too much information from their employer. I have meet many employees who are willing to make-up information to fill in the gaps of what they believe – but cannot find out – is happening in their organization. In normal times this can be amusing, in times of crisis it becomes dangerous.

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Here's a tie to the previous point. Leaders often feel awkward. "Why should we have the teleconference," they ask, "we've got nothing new to report." Visibility and information go hand in glove. A leader may not have something new to report, but her appearance will speak volumes. "She looks calm and assured. I guess I can face another day on the phones." "I know it's bad, but he looked confident. Maybe we can get through this." "I never thought I'd hear one of our leaders say they didn't know. In a strange way it felt good to hear we're not the only ones a bit in the dark." See, there was plenty of information to be shared.

Leaders must be open to emotion

Crisis is filled with emotions. All kinds of them. At the strangest moments with little predictability. Leaders need to understand this fact and deal with it. You can't call yourself a leader and say I can cope with all of it as long as no one cries, yells, argues, falls apart, or (insert an emotional outburst of your own choosing. It's not easy, nor should it be, to deal with raw emotions and most leaders haven't been taught how. Some people have a gift for empathy and know the right thing to do or say in these situations, but most leaders don't. So learn. Don't wait for a crisis. Act now. Tap into the Human Resources professionals on your staff, get some coaching from a Mental Health professional on how to become more comfortable and effective dealing with emotions connected with a crisis. This is mandatory professional development for leaders and there's no time like the present to do it.

While we're discussing emotions, here's one final assignment. Leaders, during a crisis or normal times, must always bring hope to their people. When leaders give up hope, despair follows more quickly than you can imagine. Think of Florence Nightingale, the lady with the lamp. She could not cure the soldiers lying in the hospital beds; she could not take away their pain. She had no news of the battles, of winning or losing. Walking into the ward meant hearing the sounds of terrible pain and the finality of death. All she had was a lamp that gave off illumination. She lit it and carried it through the darkest part of the night, up and down the wards of the hospital and the soldiers were comforted and slept. A leader in action.

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