LEADERSHIP DURING CRISIS

NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY AND UNCERTAINTY

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On the evening of October 8, 2017, more than a dozen fires broke out in Northern California and spread rapidly, fueled by dry conditions and powerful diablo winds. Becoming what is known as a conflagration, many of these fires traveled as fast as 200 feet per second—jumping major highways and devastating communities like Coffey Park in Santa Rosa. Because these fires emerged overnight and quickly destroyed communications infrastructure, first responders and community members canvassed door-to-door on foot, warning threatened neighborhoods to evacuate. Over the ensuing days, emergency management officials battled what became some of the most destructive fires in California's history, and many unofficial leaders emerged to help their communities cope with the damage.

Crises like the Northern California fires create both challenge and opportunity for leaders. They introduce significant uncertainty and yet require leaders to make decisions with profound consequences. During a period of time where fundamental—and potentially undesirable—change is possible, crises require leaders to demonstrate confidence when they may feel the most vulnerable and maintain vision for others when their own line of sight is obscured. Often, when we reflect on the response to a natural disaster or a corporate crisis, we observe that leadership fundamentally influenced outcomes—that is, whether communities and organizations were able to withstand the shock or stress upon them and whether or not they were able to recover, or even benefit, from that disruption. The U.S. House of Representatives Select Bipartisan Committee report on Hurricane Katrina found exactly this: "If 9/11 was a failure of imagination, then Katrina was a failure of initiative. It was a failure of leadership."

Given the challenges crises present for leaders, the Center for Disaster Management and the Frances Hesselbein Leadership Forum—of the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs (GSPIA)—have collaborated over the past year to understand common behaviors

among those who effectively lead through such conditions. This collaboration includes a podcast series, "Leadership During Crisis," featuring seasoned emergency managers, public leaders, and individuals who took spontaneous and unplanned action to lead. We have considered diverse types of crises—from fires to mass shootings—and in local to global contexts. Ultimately, we have observed common behaviors across three dimensions—how leaders assume and demonstrate responsibility in a crisis, how they make decisions and collaborate with others in uncertainty, and how they cope with substantial stress. Each of these dimensions is explored below and in the accompanying sidebar through anecdotes from our podcast interviews, as well as other cases of effective leadership in crisis.

Assumption and Demonstration of Responsibility

Scholars and practitioners increasingly accept the idea that leadership is the ability to influence and facilitate others towards common goals, not merely a function of holding an official position. Regarding leading in crisis, this evolution has two important implications. First, it challenges the notion that a crisis can be managed through command-and-control strategies alone—an argument that others have made regarding emergency management and homeland security specifically. For example, Jack Anderson, a senior

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analyst with the Department of Homeland Security's National Protection and Programs Directorate, argues that modern approaches to dealing with risk suffer from a "fortress problem," wherein we attempt to know and control more than is possible. Our communities and the social, economic, and technology systems we depend upon are increasingly complex. Crisis represents a disruption to these complex systems, and the impacts of a crisis are not likely to be linear—meaning that we cannot fully predict or control how the crisis will unfold or how elements of these systems will react.

Second, this evolution challenges our traditional understanding of who leads during crisis. A common phenomenon following major disasters is the observance of emergent behavior—represented by individuals or organizations that take on new or adapted roles in response to needs presented by the crisis. We saw this repeatedly during last year's torrent of natural disasters: residents in Puerto Rico building a pulley system for food and water after the bridge connecting their village was destroyed; bystanders and neighbors in Mexico City organizing themselves to save people trapped in the rubble of a massive earthquake; and wine country leaders turning their resources and network to focus on disaster response and recovery needs north of San Francisco. Leadership in crisis, therefore, takes both official and emergent forms—but we can still observe common behaviors among such individuals in how they assume and demonstrate responsibility for leading their communities.

Taking Responsibility, Publicly

The former FEMA administrator, Craig Fugate, often said, "Presence is a mission." He meant that FEMA personnel need to be visible and available in communities affected by disaster. Among effective leaders in crisis, we observe similar behavior. These leaders are publicly seen and heard—they do not simply make decisions behind closed doors and communicate directives by memorandum or press release. For example, during a months-long spate of bomb threats levied against the University of

The Behaviors of Effective Leaders in Crisis Situations

Assume and Demonstrate Responsibility: *Influence and motivate others to navigate complex, interrelated systems*

– Take public responsibility

– Facilitate shared goals and define outcomes across diverse stakeholders

– Build adaptive strategies that evolve with the crisis

Balance Expertise and Intuition to Act Decisively under Uncertainty: *Acknowledge imperfect information and create frameworks that result in action*

– Articulate principles to balance expertise, analysis and intuition

– Leverage diverse experiences, including outside traditional leadership roles

– Possess a bias for action

– Adapt style to engage effectively with spontaneous networks or actors

Build Resilience to Cope with Prolonged High-Stress Situations: *Embrace the challenge through focus on values and community support*

– Acknowledge the extent of the crisis and focus on the next best decision

– Build relationships and rely upon peers to share the burden together

Pittsburgh (Pitt) in 2012, then-chancellor Mark Nordenberg and his senior staff joined faculty and students being evacuated from threatened buildings. Following a tornado that destroyed their hometown of Monson, Massachusetts in 2011, sisters Caitria and Morgan O'Neill set up an improvised command center in their local church, gave news media a Google Voice number where they could be reached, and started coordinating residents and volunteers. In their widely viewed TED talk, Morgan explains, "We just started answering questions and making decisions because someone—anyone—had to." The O'Neill sisters have since established Recovers.org, which provides other communities affected by disaster with a framework to organize their own recovery.

Facilitating Shared Goals

A crisis of any nature requires diverse organizations and individuals to collaborate effectively and quickly. Often, these actors have varying degrees of familiarity with one another, and they may or may not have planned in advance for the conditions they face. Regardless of prior interaction or planning, leaders must facilitate a shared vision for what is desired throughout and following the crisis. Both Mark Ghilarducci, director of California's Office of Emergency Services, and Robert Fenton, FEMA's lead official in the state, described this as critical in the response to the 2017 fires and other disasters. When I met with them in mid-November, they had established the goal of removing all fire debris by Christmas. "What we've been trying to do is force outcomes," Fenton said. "We may not get to 100 percent, but it gets the machinery all working towards a common goal. Setting an expectation unifies us politically and operationally, and allows us to communicate with the survivors what that's going to be."

Adapting Strategies and Aligning Resources

Many leaders we interviewed cope with the uncertainty presented in a crisis by regularly revisiting and adapting the strategies they undertake to achieve desired outcomes—and potentially the outcomes themselves. Given that conditions in a crisis can change quickly, leaders must constantly revisit whether the strategies they have articulated are still relevant and effective, including making tough decisions about how to allocate limited resources against these strategies. For example, search and rescue teams from the United States and

Iceland were some of the first international responders to arrive in Haiti following the catastrophic earthquake in 2010. The Haitian government and the U.N. mission in the country suffered significant damage and needed support in coordinating international assets responding to the country's request for assistance. The U.S. and Iceland teams pivoted to this task. Dewey Perks, the Urban Search and Rescue Unit lead for the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, explained to us, "We held a very quick meeting on the tarmac at Port-au-Prince airport… — Iceland agreed that they would start the coordination mechanism for other [search and rescue] teams that were coming in. Our first task was to help the airport officials… we were registering everyone who was coming in."

Decision Making and Collaboration in Uncertainty

Early in a crisis, leaders must understand that the information available to them may not be entirely accurate or complete—and they must make decisions with potentially profound consequences anyway. In his book *Streetlights and Shadows: Searching for the Keys to Adaptive Decision Making,* psychologist Gary A. Klein argues that the common assumptions we make about effective decision making require revision to remain true in ambiguous situations. Significantly, he argues, we cannot rely only on rational and scientific methods of analysis wherein we gather as much information as possible before making a choice. Rather, leaders in ambiguous situations—including crises—balance expertise and analysis with experience-driven intuition, and they act decisively when urgency calls for it.

Balancing Expertise, Analysis, and Intuition

Nordenberg received almost daily counsel from federal prosecutors and law enforcement officials, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), during the period of time in 2012 when more than 150 bomb threats, sent to media outlets through anonymizing re-mailers, were levied against Pitt. Their expertise was instrumental in managing a campus under significant duress and disruption, but the decision whether or not to evacuate every building for every threat, no matter how credible, ultimately rested with the chancellor. It was a decision he made over and over again, erring on the side of precaution. "Such decisions, though informed by the expertise of others, rest on an understanding of your organization and its people, and in this case, we placed the highest priority on student safety," Nordenberg explained.

Leveraging and Adapting Experience

In many of our interviews with individuals who have led through crisis, we observe how these leaders apply diverse types of experiences to cope with the situations they face—leveraging both traditional and indirect experience as a starting point for action, and then adapting lessons from their experience to current conditions. As Fenton told us following the Northern California wildfires, "You have the Rolodex in your head that's flipping around going—very similar to, very much like, the 2003 fires, but worse. That lets you know you're going to experience [certain] problems, and you try to stay ahead of those problems. But you're going to get new problems. And you need to be ready and in front of the new problems."

This behavior is also common among community-based leaders such as Jennifer Gray Thompson in the Springs area of Sonoma Valley, who took on an unplanned coordination role for her community following the wildfires. Jennifer credited her experience as a long-time volunteer with the homeless in San Francisco as helping her understand the systems that come together to support an individual's basic needs. She also explained the experience helped her appreciate her own influence—that is, she knew she could not solve homelessness, but she could do a simple thing like help homeless individuals obtain coats. Throughout her interview with us, Jennifer kept coming back to the questions she asked across her community throughout the fires, "What do you need and how can I help?"

> ## *"What do you need and how can I help?"*

Appreciating Urgency and Acting Decisively

One of the most common behaviors we have observed among leaders in crisis is a readiness or even bias for action. These leaders do not wait to be told what to do—they work proactively to identify what is most needed in the moment and they try to anticipate what will be required next. While they work collaboratively and seek advice, they are ultimately willing to make tough decisions. "You have to move decisively," Mark Ghilarducci, California's lead emergency manager, told us. "You have to move fast. Early-on decisions … are very important for the long-term. If you're indecisive, you're going to have a lot of problems." The same behavior is common among emergent leaders in a crisis. Such leaders may be willing to work with official organizational structures, but will not typically wait for permission or direction to act. We need only look to the recent volunteers who took to their own boats to rescue individuals from the flood waters in Houston.

Collaborating With Existing and Emergent Networks

During a crisis, interactions between established and spontaneous actors and organizations are common. Leaders in a crisis must effectively navigate these interactions, including adapting their own leadership approach given their role in relation to different stakeholders. This is exactly what leaders of the U.S. Coast Guard did in responding to individuals stranded in lower Manhattan following the 9/11 attacks. Realizing the magnitude of what it was facing—in terms of hundreds of thousands needing evacuation—and the recognition that private volunteers were already

evacuating some individuals by boat, the Coast Guard spontaneously called for all available private vessels to assist in an unplanned evacuation. As the 2011 documentary *Boatlift* describes, the operation was the largest maritime evacuation in U.S. history.

Coping With Substantial Stress

Leaders in a crisis may experience substantial or prolonged periods of stress given the uncertainty and demands they face, including making difficult decisions when no ideal outcome is possible. Leaders who effectively cope during crisis maintain a high degree of stress tolerance by accepting the situation as difficult, grounding themselves in a higher mission or values, and drawing upon their larger community for support. Ultimately, a leader's ability to manage the stress of a complex situation sets the tone and example for others.

Accepting the Challenge and Grounding in Values

In Pittsburgh, local leaders are facing a similar story occurring across the United States—aging drinking water infrastructure has the potential to present significant risks for communities across the city. These risks are complex and include precautionary disruptions in service for maintenance or water main breaks, as well as more significant concerns about potential lead exposure. While Pittsburgh is not facing a full-blown drinking water crisis like what occurred in Flint, Michigan, current local leaders are accepting the significant infrastructure and funding challenges

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facing them, and are grounding their short- and long-term decisions to manage those risks in values such as transparency and precaution. For example, in December 2017, a large water main burst over the weekend in a densely populated area of Pittsburgh. It was not the first time a water main break occurred in the city—but it was unique in that local leaders issued a widespread boil water alert given the potential for backflow in the water due to loss of pressure. "Given what we've experienced and our focus on being precautionary and being absolutely certain about the quality of our water, we decided to make that call," explained Will Pickering of the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority.

Drawing Upon Community for Support

Across our interviews, we have also observed the fundamental role of community support in helping leaders and others cope with crisis and the stress it creates. Perks described his experience with search and rescue in Haiti this way, "[a crisis] draws the teams closer together because now they're totally dependent on one another as well as the situation that's facing them. They're going to be able to get through that together." Ghilarducci expressed the same regarding officials working together at all levels in response to the wildfires, "This is a marathon, not a sprint. We're going to have good days and bad. This is going to be hard, so you need to prepare yourself. Not everything is going to be perfect, so don't think perfect is going to get in the way of good enough. But we're going to do this together."

Conclusion: Learning From Crisis

Among the leaders we have interviewed and studied, we also find the common habit of learning from crisis. The international search and rescue community made significant changes to how it coordinates itself during disasters following lessons learned from Haiti. The community leaders north of San Francisco have turned to their own organizations to improve planning and preparedness for future disasters. Emergency managers at many levels are exploring ways to better support and

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integrate emergent behavior in order to meet the needs that major crises create.

Every leader is likely to face a crisis of some form. While we cannot fully predict all crises or the way they will unfold, we can identify behaviors that can best support us in coping effectively with what we face and leading our communities to the best possible outcomes. Learning from others in crisis is a starting place.

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