

## Learning from Crucible Moments: Lessons in Crisis Leadership

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### Abstract

Access to formal and informal leadership education and mentoring all contribute to the development of library leaders. Though crisis leadership may be discussed in leadership training, it is often the case that experiencing and leading through crises is the primary way in which most library leaders gain skill in managing these challenging situations. If we learn through our mistakes, then crisis leadership is surely a shining example of this principle for leaders are most apt to falter when finding themselves in the crucible. This article presents the crisis situation in which leaders are subjected to the changes forged in the crucible, as an opportunity for leaders to learn, gain wisdom and grow professionally, even when their performance may falter. It also presents the dark times crisis as a newer type of situation leaders will increasingly confront and for which they will find it difficult to adequately prepare. Different crisis scenarios are presented along with recommendations for how leaders can best manage and learn from them.

### Learning from Crucible Moments: Lessons in Crisis Leadership

It is inevitable. Librarians who choose to lead will find themselves in a crisis. The crisis will be one of many possible types, what is at risk may be small or large stakes and what it takes to resolve it will all vary from situation to situation. What our leadership crises seem to all have in common is arriving when we least expect it and challenging us at our most vulnerable moments when we least prepared to respond. How well a leader manages a crisis situation can impact their future, both at their current position and all those that may follow it. Preparation for a crisis certainly helps, but ultimately how well leaders perform in a crisis may be owing to their prior exposure to crucible moments and in what ways that experience forged their ability to face down a crisis.

While it is often the library dean or director who must confront a crisis, other staff may also need to cope with a sudden crisis. The worst possible scenario, such as an active shooter in the building, a natural or man-made disaster, or any other life-threatening event, is the ultimate crisis and it will involve staff at any and every level. Most library personnel will fortunately evade this level of crisis during the course of their careers, but even a tense human relations situation can test our resolve. In the wake of a crisis, however things turn out, library leaders and their staffs should always seek to learn from the experience. That is the essence of the crucible moment, an opportunity to grow as a leader by emerging from a crisis, if not unscathed, in a position of greater confidence in one's ability to manage a crisis and lead through it.

As with other leadership skills, those needed for successfully navigating crisis situations are learnable. This article is designed to facilitate the acquisition of this skill set by presenting information about the types of crises leaders can face, how to recognize and learn from crucible

moments, strategies for leading in a crisis situation and dealing with the more contemporary “dark times” crisis. The dark times crisis is characterized by powerfully saddening events that are far beyond our local control but that can significantly impact both leaders and those they lead. They are unique in that they occur externally, but their impact is felt deep within our organizations, and leaders can make a difference with their response. Leaders are unlikely to completely ready themselves for any and all crisis situations, so the keys to managing and leading through them are mental preparation and learning from the lessons of great leadership. With enlightening from personal crucible moments, library leaders should be well positioned for a crisis.

### Learning from Leadership Crises

Crisis situations and crucible moments happen when you least expect them. Like an enormous, overpowering wave that hits suddenly and without expectation, the force knocks you flat. These events deliver a sudden shock, an awakening. Those who experience them may describe an adrenaline rush that leaves them feeling weak or queasy but accompanied by a fight or flight feeling. Sometimes we can see a crisis coming. We may be able to prepare for it. We never quite know what will morph into a crisis. What seems routine and normal can suddenly and without warning spiral into threat and chaos.

At the ACRL 2017 conference I attended a session where a team of librarians from a small college presented their results from an assessment of student essays written for an information literacy assignment. On several of the slides there were snippets of essays that illustrated poor writing. On another slide students were referred to in less than respectful terms, though there was no doubt the presenters meant no harm. However, they clearly lacked self-awareness about how some attendees might perceive the portrayal of students, poking fun at them, even if intended as harmless comic relief. It is almost an unwritten rule in higher education that you never make fun of students or ridicule them in public. You know what happened next. A twitter blowup with librarian shaming. There was a photo, it was tweeted, re-tweeted and much negative backlash ensued.

It is their unknown quality that characterizes the crucible moment. Initially, leaders will find themselves at a loss for how to respond. Though a sense of panic may set in, resolving to maintain a cautious and thoughtful response, as much as the situation allows it, is a desired path to resolution. Leaders are resourceful and can draw on past experiences even if none are quite like this new one. For example, consulting with mentors for advice, seeking out opinions from campus colleagues, particularly those with public relations crisis experience, or researching the literature for recommended paths to recovery from this type of crisis. The person leading that presentation was the director of a library. This crucible moment would test their leadership.

What actions should the director take in leading through this crisis? The director engaged in recommended response strategies: a public apology; admitting the lack of awareness; taking responsibility; noting it would never happen again. All good responses though likely inadequate to appease some in the library community. No doubt some lessons were learned, especially being more attuned to making public statements that others will label

as insensitive. Self-awareness and emotional intelligence are critical for successful leadership. Ultimately, leaders do get past their crucible moments and the wise ones learn and improve from the experience. While no action will erase the damage done, the best-case scenario is the one that minimizes it and leads to a quick return to normalcy. What remains is to learn from our personal crucible moments as well as the stories of other leaders who share their own crucibles and their lessons learned.<sup>1</sup>

## Types of VUCA Crises

The history of leadership is rich with stories of leaders who had to guide their organizations through a time of crisis. Perhaps no better known or more analyzed crisis is the story of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. *The Essence of Decision*, by Graham Allison, is the classic analysis of the crisis and provides leaders with valuable insight into how decisions are made in times of crisis.<sup>2</sup> Few leaders will ever face a crisis of such proportion, but they may have their personal version of the missile crisis. Take an unexpected tumultuous event, add considerable ambiguity, differing opinions on what to do and a measure of personal indecision and you suddenly have your own missile-like crucible moment. Every crisis will differ, so what worked in the past may be of little help. How a crisis is approached can vary depending on the availability or lack of useful information. What can help is being alert to the type of crisis, the general nature of such crises and what strategies may work best to resolve them.

The challenge for leaders in a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complexity, Ambiguous) world is that they deal with crises on multiple levels.<sup>3</sup> Depending on the level and nature of the crisis our ability to control or contain the situation may be limited. These four types of crisis situations most commonly challenge leaders:

### *Personal Crisis*

Easily understood and relatable because everyone, at some point, has a personal crisis. Whether it takes the guise of a crisis of personal confidence, personal finances, a family illness or a sudden, unexpected situation, such as flooded basement, we all know these experiences. When leaders suffer one, they must still maintain their work presence and keep the organization moving forward. Experts suggest that when leaders suffer a personal crisis it is best to share, not hide it. Showing vulnerability is not a sign of weakness and it will likely earn staff respect. Divulging a personal crisis puts a leader's humanity on display. While it may garner some appreciated sympathy, what really counts in a personal crisis is having the simple luxury of tending to what needs to be done.

### *Staff Crisis*

There are as many types of workplace crises as there are potential staff situations. Leaders may suddenly find themselves dealing with a budget crisis if funding is substantially cut, with implications for staffing. Leaders can deal with everything from an assault on an employee by a patron, to an altercation between staff members to a bedbug infestation. Good leaders rally staff in a crisis situation to deal with external pressures on the library. A staffing crisis can manifest itself in many different ways. It can encompass everything from an integral

employee suddenly resigning to a disgruntled job candidate who seeks to challenge a hiring decision. Ask most leaders about their staff crisis situations and they will tell you two things. First, they botched it on more than one occasion. Second, better have HR on speed dial.

### *Local Crisis*

This crisis is fairly common for a library because it is typically situated, organizationally, within a larger institutional structure. When a shock to the larger system hits, those shockwaves can hit the library hard. At my own institution, our top administration experienced a scandal of sorts, involving poor financial decisions. It led to the departure of both the president and provost within the same month. Though rare for any organization to quickly lose its top two executives, it resulted in significant institutional instability. It caused a costly slowdown to a new library building project, along with general uncertainty about institutional leadership that affected staff morale. Local crises can also result when an external force in the community, such as municipal or state government change, results in a challenge to the library system. Another possibility is local unrest that turns into a destructive mix of protests and riots, such as what occurred in Ferguson, Missouri or Baltimore, Maryland, a crisis in which library leaders must respond to a completely new, previously unencountered situation in order to bring stability to the community. These can truly test a leader's ability to contribute to a local problem resolution that is bigger than the library itself.

### *Global Crisis*

Though a global crisis is less likely to have an immediate impact on a library organization, there is a cascading consequence effect that requires library leaders to be mindful of new types of crises that can unexpectedly require change in ways that are difficult to imagine. There was a time when no one would have run an active shooter drill in the library, but now we have them on occasion and share reminders about "run, hide, fight" more regularly. When a global crisis does happen, it can impact staff and their ability to concentrate as they might normally do. Re-establishing normalcy may take longer than expected, so leaders should communicate to staff first, to acknowledge the crisis, its impact and affects and, two, inform staff the organization is there to offer support and a safe place to share concerns. Given the interconnectedness of our world, the dark times crisis elsewhere on the planet, can quickly reach our local setting and affect us as if it happened on our own soil. Leaders who react swiftly and decisively will manage the crisis with the confidence of their followers.

### **Learning from the Crucible and Crisis**

Leaders perform better in a crisis when they are self-aware about their ability to manage themselves and others in a VUCA situation. Start by putting into place a response plan that guides action because it will be difficult to think straight under pressure. Less thinking and more reaction from muscle memory can make all the difference. In the aftermath of dealing with a crisis situation, ask what worked and what failed? This process of reflection can reveal unique insights and observations about future actions to take in a crisis situation. This section shares those ideas and action steps applicable to most crisis situations that will help leaders survive and ideally thrive in the crisis.

As global crises continue to be part of our regular news cycle, events reported on the front page and social media, there are good examples of leaders fumbling and stumbling in dealing with a crisis – and the result is they compound the crisis. There are good examples from which leaders can draw lessons for how to respond when dealing with their own crisis. Just take something as simple as a snowstorm. When Cory Booker was the mayor of Newark, his response after a blizzard was to take personal responsibility for supervising the snow removal teams - but he also helped citizens shovel their cars out of snow, delivered essential supplies to shut ins and then used social media to share his first-hand observations and to let residents see that a leader was in charge and demonstrating control of the situation.<sup>4</sup> This example and others provide some suggestions for how leaders can react in a crisis – let’s review them.

### *Keep Calm and Assess*

Leaders need to reassure staff and their superiors they are in charge with a clear understanding of the nature of the crisis. What caused it? What’s the current status? Who’s directly and indirectly impacted? Not only do they need good information gathering, using a variety of sources, such as assembling staff who may have more information and unique insights, but it is just as important to interpret the information to assess what’s happening – which is also the start of deciding how to act or respond.

### *Act Quick but Not Too Quickly*

The next step a leader needs to take once he or she grasps the situation is to act – that means making decisions about how to react to the situation. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, president Kennedy was pushed by some of his more hawkish advisers to take military action. Rather than quickly react he slowed things down a bit to consider multiple responses. By slowing down, it also allowed him to obtain more information and re-assess the situation. At this point in the crisis the leader will want to have a sense of what direction to move in. What’s the best-case scenario for managing the crisis? Leaders must avoid acting in a way that makes people nervous or suggests there is confusion about the situation or total uncertainty for what action to take next.

### *Establish Lines of Communication*

Routine, clear communication is a core quality of effective leadership. That means listening is first and foremost in gaining trust. Established lines of communication with staff are even more critical in a crisis where transparent leaders can make a difference. From our own experience we know that being kept up-to-date is a key to coping in a crisis; information is a highly valued commodity. Effective leaders will put multiple, reliable channels of communication into place well ahead of a crisis. Whatever mediums are used, be it a blog, podcast or texting network, it establishes the lines of communication. Occasionally, there may be a crisis where the leader has information but is unable to share it. Gain transparency by acknowledging the situation.

### *Manage Expectations Realistically*

Even when a leader has communicated what they know about the situation, or as much as the leader feels they can comfortably share, it's best to anticipate some staff will still express dismay and alarm. Leaders can help individuals cope by providing their personal perspective on the resolution to the crisis. After establishing the magnitude of the crisis situation, leaders can provide their realistic expectation of likely next steps on the road to recovery, as well as a timeframe for a return to normalcy.

### *Demonstrate Control*

In non-crisis leadership the ability to relinquish control and allow subordinates to have autonomy contributes to a healthy organization. When crisis strikes staff will want to know their leader is in control. They will look to their leader for information and answers. Depending on the situation, leaders may operate with less control than desired. Though they may lack the elements of control, leaders need to bring stability by taking action, assigning tasks and committing resources to damage control. Leaders should strive for decisiveness that will instill in staff the confidence that their leader is in control and working to resolve the crisis.

### *Be Flexible*

Control implies some level of rigidity, but during a crisis a leader will need to exert maximum flexibility to quickly adapt as a new response strategy becomes necessary. The crisis resolution that appeared appropriate at first may prove inadequate or totally wrong as the situation changes or new information becomes available. No matter what happens, leaders need to acknowledge they won't have all the answers. Being flexible also means being willing to consult with subordinates and allow them to contribute to the crisis response. A leader should set the direction, but enlisting others to get through a crisis allows for greater flexibility.

It is often the case that leaders alone will only achieve so much on their own when confronting a crisis. Dealing with a crisis can certainly benefit from a team effort, though having a lead to guide the process will keep everyone focused on their role. It may also require advice from external colleagues who have the appropriate experience. As in all things, strive to keep it basic, simple and straightforward. These six strategies can apply to most crisis situations, but let's not exclude any other strategy that may work for you or your situation.

### **Leading Through a Dark Times Crisis**

There is a new type of crisis with which leaders must deal. Typically external to the organization, global terror attacks, senseless violence or catastrophic disasters, these shocking and unexpected crises lead to damage in ways that are less visible to leaders. Depression, anxiety and new heightened levels of stress may lead to workplace challenges that leaders are less well prepared in knowing how to respond. We hardly understand why they happen, let alone being capable of any rational or analytical methods of response as we might in more familiar crisis situations. Many leaders struggle with this personally. When these types of crises strike, there is a strong sense that something needs to be said. Finding the right words or appropriate response is hard. Sound advice on how to react in these situations is scarce. Simply

offering a roadmap that leads to better times is no longer sufficient. How can leaders best respond to the dark times crisis? An emotionally intelligent leader may be more adept at sensing when others have strong feelings.

During his two terms in office, President Obama repeatedly demonstrated what great leaders do in times of crisis. As each terrible act of domestic or foreign violence unfolded, as the nation grew more divided by racial and religious hatred, the president served as healer-in-chief. While his words and deeds could not soothe everyone, his presence in leading us through difficult times gave reassurance that the center holds and that we would weather the crisis in hopes of better times. What can leaders take away from this? In a *Harvard Business Review* article about this new type of crisis, “Being a Good Boss in Dark Times”, author Jennifer Porter offers recommendations for responding to a dark times crisis:<sup>5</sup>

### *Acknowledge Your Own Emotions*

Leaders who are able to share their personal feelings of shock, sadness or numbness during a dark times crisis will help colleagues address their own feelings. Past advice was to keep emotions out of the workplace. Contemporary leaders need to understand it is acceptable to acknowledge one’s own emotions during these difficult times.

### *Speak from the Heart*

Accept that your words or actions will likely cause some discomfort and that whatever you do or say will be far from perfect, but that’s normal and acceptable. Speaking from the heart is far more powerful than finding the perfect words to speak.

### *Create a Psychological Safety Zone*

Create a workplace zone, physically or virtually, where workers feel comfortable asking each other how they feel about what happened. No one should worry that they will be inappropriate, ridiculed, or embarrassed by speaking freely.

### *Channel Emotions into a Stronger Organization*

Rather than feel despondent or hopeless about the future after tragedy strikes, reframe those emotions and channel them into a stronger resolve to build a resilient organization capable of supporting workers’ emotional needs.

### *Allow Time for Emotional Processing*

Place a momentary hold on business and shift conversations to more difficult topics. Yes, we all have important work to attend to in our organizations, but in the wake of a dark times crisis our daily routines and deadlines are less important than giving ourselves time to share what really matters. Leaders will want to facilitate conversations that support processing and healing. Those less than comfortable doing so should wisely seek out organizational support for assistance in guiding these discussions.

## Hope for the Best, Prepare in the Crucible

No one who aspires to lead in a library organization does so anticipating leading through times of crisis or dealing with a leadership crisis of their own making. The unpredictable nature of a crisis makes it virtually impossible to adequately prepare in advance. Likewise, no amount of leadership education or training may enable leaders to respond to any crisis, let alone a dark times crisis, with complete confidence in their ability. The essential redeeming aspect of crisis leadership is that the only way to truly fail is to do absolutely nothing. Whatever response a leader makes, and this essay suggests multiple possibilities, the outcome will be better when leaders study crisis leadership and are aware of strategies for anticipating, weathering and recovering from a crisis. In those cases where it fails to do so, a great deal of learning will result from being subjected to the crucible.

Leaders may wish to remember that, according to Porter, leadership is about much more than strategic planning and operational excellence. She writes that “A leader sets the emotional tone and example – in good times and perhaps more importantly in bad.”<sup>6</sup> When a crisis hits, a leader can hope that what they have learned from prior crisis situations will enable them to perform better and make the right decisions. Then there are those crises where the best a leader can do is offer words and comfort to shine some light onto a path through the darkness. It is a lesson worth learning for students of leadership—one we hope is rarely needed.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bell, Steven J. “The Power of Stories: Learning from Leaders and Their Crucible Moments”. In *Crucible Moments: Inspiring Library Leadership*, 1-14. Edited by Steven J. Bell. Santa Barbara: Mission Bell Media, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Allison, Graham. *Essence of Decision*. Boston: Little Brown, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Bell, Steven J. “Leading Through VUCA Times.” *Library Journal* (September 28, 2017). Retrieved at <https://lj.libraryjournal.com/2013/10/opinion/leading-from-the-library/the-best-man-for-the-job-is-a-woman-leading-from-the-library/>.

<sup>4</sup> Baldoni, John. “How a Good Leader Reacts to a Crisis.” *Harvard Business Review* (January 4, 2011). Retrieved at: <https://hbr.org/2011/01/how-a-good-leader-reacts-to-a>.

<sup>5</sup> Porter, Jennifer. “Being a Good Boss in Dark Times.” *Harvard Business Review* (July 5, 2016). Retrieved at: <https://hbr.org/2016/07/being-a-good-boss-in-dark-times>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.