

A Framework for Crisis Leadership Using the Martin Library Leadership Definition

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Introduction

America spends an enormous amount of money each year on leadership training, and sadly, a crisis might be the best leadership training available. An emergency or catastrophe shines a bright light on an organization's leadership and brings any shortcomings in leadership front and center. What makes for good leadership in a crisis is often grounded in what leaders do during non-crisis times. The Martin Library Leadership Definition states, "Leadership is influencing followers through the creation and managing of organizational meaning, building and maintaining relationships, and the consistent demonstration of professional and managerial competence."

This definition provides a framework for a library leader's approach to leadership that is equally valid for day-to-day operations as it is in crisis management. While the best leaders will have worked on and developed these areas of their leadership before an emergency, during a crisis is just as good a time as any for a leader to start building these abilities and skills. The three elements of this definition – meaning, relationships, and competence – are just as critical in emergency operations – if not more – as they are in day-to-day regular operations.

Meaning

"In times of crisis, people reach for meaning. Meaning is strength. Our survival may depend on our seeking and finding it."—Viktor Frankl

During a crisis, moral leadership takes precedent. A library and its leadership must emphasize its principles and values. A good library leader needs to keep reinforcing values and reminding the library staff of what is important: the health, welfare, well-being, and safety of those who work in the library. Finances, the collection, and everything else comes second. The meaning a library leader gives the work of the library – the mission and vision of the library and the importance the work has for the library's community – is grounded in the values of the library. When a library is well-functioning in a crisis, these values are already guiding the work and thought processes of the library staff, but it is still important for a library leader to regularly remind everyone of what is important at this time and the importance the library's work has. In a library that is struggling to adjust to emergency operations, a library leader needs to emphasize the core values of the library and the importance of everyone's health and well-being regularly. A library leader can turn anxiety into confidence by focusing on what individuals and the library can control and directing everyone's efforts to those things. Another important part of managing and creating meaning is the idea we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. Everyone in the library is part of the library, the library is part of the community it serves, and the whole is always greater than its parts. Individual actions are amplified through the shared community of the library. Being part of something larger than the self, also means individuals are not alone. Those who are struggling in a crisis – whether with mental health, family issues, or financially – are not alone. They have the others in the library to turn to for help. This coupled with the importance of library staff well-being makes for an important meaning any library leader can emphasize in a crisis.

Relationships

Relationships are built on trust, and ideally a library leader has cultivated these relationships in good times. Library staff need to be able to trust a library leader – what they are saying is truthful and what they are doing is in the best interest of the library – and a library leader also needs to trust middle managers to make good decisions and show good judgement. The last thing a library needs is a dean/director micromanaging the reference schedule and one-time purchases, or for librarians and library staff to question and even work against every decision the library's leadership makes. But even without or enough of this previous work, library leaders can create, build, and strengthen relationships during a crisis.

With an emphasis on the well-being of individuals, library leaders need to take the time to inquire about library staff, learn how they are holding up, ask what staff needs from leadership, and in general stay in close contact with those who work in the library. Looking after the morale of people in the library and taking steps to actively raise it builds trust. Library leaders also need to model good behavior in a crisis. If they want their staff to take care of themselves, then leaders need to take care of themselves. During a crisis, leaders are often working seven days a week and in the early morning and late at night, but leaders still need to take the time to care of themselves. They need to maintain their health – eat right, rest, exercise, etc. – and find ways to bring themselves comfort and inspiration, find support, and re-energize themselves.

During a crisis, library leaders need to be emotionally accessible. Too often society thinks of effective leaders as being made of rock, displaying little to no emotion and definitely not fear. While leaders need to not let emotions get the better of them and remain even-handed and centered, effective leaders need to be emotionally accessible. They need to show they are real people who are scared and worried just like everyone else. Emotional accessibility is also critical when showing empathy and compassion to those in the library. A shared emotional moment can go a long way to helping someone through a tough time. Critical for library leaders to remember is the emphasis on health and well-being does not end when the crisis does. Once the crisis is over, library staff still need to process what they and the library have gone through. This requires emotional accessibility on the part of the leader in order to ask the question how do we help each other not just get through but get over this?

A main key to any and all relationships is communication, and during a crisis communication is of the utmost importance, and this includes listening to the ideas and needs of others and being visible. A leader who hides away during a crisis has lost contact and cannot effectively communicate. The people of the library need to know what is happening, what has been done, and what is being talked about. How often a library leader communicates is important. Too little communication and people are left uninformed, which means they will start filling in their own information gaps with stories that may or may not be true. They also will quickly lose faith in library leadership and conclude their library leaders either do not know much or are incapable of communicating and leading. Communicate too often and the library might tune you out. When in doubt, err on the side of too much communication. But of even greater importance than the frequency of communication is the way in which a library leader communicates. Library leaders should be candid, mixing honesty with optimism. Leaders should never sugar coat the present realities, but they also must never lose belief that the future will be better.

To Aristotle, rhetoric had three components: Logos (logic), Pathos (passion), and Ethos (ethics). Logos is a library leader's vision and mission and is a large part of creating and managing organizational meaning. Logos is important in a crisis because a library leader must

clearly communicate the current state, possible future states, and how the library can continue to meet its vision and mission. Ethos is critical to all aspects of leadership at all times. It reflects the leader's character and the trust library employees have in their leader. Without ethos and all it encompasses, a leader will not be able to create and manage meaning, build relationships, or appear competent. Mistakes are forgiven, but broken trust is hard to fix.

The middle principle – pathos – is the one most overlooked by leaders but is the most crucial during times of distress. Passion is an overused term in leadership and organizational literature. Many people are quick to stop listening to a message urging them to find and follow their passion or to be passionate about their work. Pathos in this context can better be thought of as an appeal to more than just rational thought. This requires a leader to be human, be vulnerable, and to communicate to others on a human level. After all, libraries consist of human beings who work with, serve, and help other human beings. Library employees all have lives outside of the library, and they have fears and anxieties about their own life and the lives of those they care about. As a crisis unfolds, questions and concerns move from the practical to the existential. Communication that appeals to something deeper in the people of the library helps alleviate those existential fears.

Once the crisis ends, communication does not, especially pathos. Regular, honest, and open communication during a crisis creates a transparency that cannot and should not be covered up once a crisis is over. After an initial crisis is over, other related crises – financial and organizational – often follow. Open and honest communication is needed just as much then. Library leaders need to create a plan to continue effective communication even during the most humdrum of times. Library leaders need to be able to lead conversations during and after a crisis about being effective organizational citizens and how we can help each other through and to recover from a crisis. Logos and ethos will not suffice. A library leader must be able to use pathos.

Professional and Managerial Competence

Even during a crisis, the work of the library cannot stop, but it very well might go on in different ways. Having a strong knowledge of the work of the library allows a library to understand and formulate plans for new approaches to the delivery of library services and for library work to continue in innovative ways. In case the library needs to be closed to the public during a crisis, this understanding is crucial in convincing boards and administrators that a library can still meet many of its community's needs while closed. Once the library gets out of crisis mode, it needs to proceed with as much normal as possible. A library should try to be one of the things that is predictable and steady in the lives of its employees and community. Even during a crisis, it is critical for a library leader to keep an eye on the long-term and think about the vision, mission, and direction of the library. Leaders should prepare for the worst and prepare for multiple futures, which is a sign of high emotional intelligence.

Ideally, the library would have been proactive about enterprise risk management and had an up-to-date disaster and emergency plan in place. This, however, might not be the case for many if not most libraries, so there is nothing like a disaster to encourage creating a disaster plan. Many libraries make it up as they go along, which is fine the first time. But an effective library leader will document what is happening, adjust on the fly, and use this experience as a base for an effective emergency plan. Decisions must be made quickly, but a leader must be careful to make knee-jerk reactions. Yet, at the same time, a library leader does not have time for deep contemplation. The best approach is to make decisions based in the values of the library.

An effective library leader should work to strip away as much bureaucracy as possible while also keeping strict lines of communication and decision making. Library leaders must establish who is in charge of what decisions, and allow those people to act as they see best. This means it is crucial for a library leader to have all of library administration on board. Building relationships and making allies amongst the leadership is an important task for a library leader. Leaders need to set aside their ego in order to accept better plans and ideas and have the courage and ability to be flexible. They also need to exhibit humility when they forget certain details or tasks. A strong library leader has a strong leadership team who work to help and support in good times and bad.

Much innovation happens during a crisis, and it can be a catalyst for broad and deep organizational change in the library. A time of crisis can also be used to examine and reevaluate daily operations. An emergency can bring to light useless paperwork, redundant procedures, and all the rest of the trappings of an ineffective organization. But a crisis can also illustrate deeper organizational issues that must be addressed like unhealthy cultures, inequity, and a lack of up-to-date training. During a crisis, many people pine for the “normal days” before the crisis, but library leaders should not be so quick to go back to the pre-crisis days. Leaders must take time to reflect on weaknesses, strengths, effective, and ineffective work and make the needed changes that will make the library better after the crisis.

Conclusion

A crisis tends to bring out either the best in a person or the worst, and it will show who is a good leader and who is not. The Martin Library Leadership Definition provides a framework for effective library leadership through creating and managing of meaning, building relationships, and exhibiting professional and managerial competence. This framework for leadership works in good times and in bad. Ideally, by the time a crisis hits a library leader would already be firmly grounded in these three areas, but even if they are not they can use this framework to guide their leadership during a crisis.

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