

# Avoid the Top 10 Mistakes Leaders Make in a Crisis

**E**mployee shooting! Chemical spill! Product recall! Cyber-technology attack! Executive kidnapping! Natural disaster! Plant bombing! Terrorist attack! Once reserved within the imagination of a Hollywood screenwriter or suspense novelist, these kinds of crises now dominate our daily news headlines. These crisis scenarios are far too common within our increasingly complex, stressful and dangerous world.

Surveys show that more of these frightening scenarios frequently weigh on the forefront of a leader's mind. Leaders realize that if they are not currently leading through a crisis, they soon will be. So how do leaders prepare themselves and their teams to face a crisis and win? What are the leadership competencies essential to successfully assessing risk and navigating through an actual crisis? Rather than begin with a list of the core competencies necessary for crisis leadership, let's look at the 10 biggest mistakes leaders typically make during a crisis. Based on these critical, sometimes life-threatening mistakes, I'll share the three key competencies for effective risk assessment and crisis leadership.

## Mistake 1: Having No Plan

General Dwight Eisenhower, the man behind the brilliant D-Day invasion plan



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that initiated the Allied victory in World War II, once said, "A plan is nothing; planning is everything." The most common mistake leaders make is to have no plan or template to follow before, during or even after a crisis occurs. They are unnecessarily caught off guard by an unexpected and potentially fatal event with no structure or action plans to follow. Through their lack of foresight (risk assessment) and proper pre-crisis planning (crisis drills), leaders will simply react to a crisis by applying knee-jerk, shoot-from-the-hip solutions.

During a crisis, a leader must align three strategic elements: the Goals, the People and the Resources. The goals define the "What," that is, the specific outcomes and objectives of the crisis intervention. The people define the "Who," getting the right people in the right positions with the right teams. The resources define the "How" that the leaders will use as they apply all the various tangible and intangible resources available to them to meet the goals. Without such a solid, strategic alignment between the goals, people and resources, crisis leadership interventions are at best futile and at worst disastrous.

## Mistake 2: No Hierarchy

One of the most critical aspects of successful crisis navigation is determining and following a proper hierarchy of executive and field leadership. Great crisis plans can quickly crumble through breakdowns in what under normal cir-

cumstances would be an effective chain of command. Even leaders with a pre-set crisis action template often fail to align the goals, people, and resources necessary to win during the crisis. When the stress and pressure of a crisis hits, something as simple as a basic "Call Down List" of whom to call, what is their responsibility, and how to reach them (cell number, email, text) is critical.

Additionally, leaders must effectively handle the "clashing egos" that so quickly appear during a crisis. Known to crisis leadership experts as the "Alexander Haig Syndrome," a well-meaning person who improperly assumes control often does far more damage than good. Such confusion can be eliminated with a well thought-out and communicated crisis hierarchy of command that is discussed and clearly understood before a crisis occurs.

## Mistake 3: Being Invisible

A leader can only be in one place at one time. Yet leaders who hide or appear removed from the crisis negate their perceived and expected leadership actions. Visibility must be delivered during and after the crisis in four areas: colleagues (crisis team and employees), customers, constituents (vendors, stockholders, suppliers) and communities (cities served, local and national media).

Remember how New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani acted during and after the chaotic time of the 9/11 terrorist attack? His multiple daily media appearances along with his hands-on approach in face-to-face meetings with many departments gave all New Yorkers (and the world) the necessary calm we all needed in seeing a visible leader at the helm.

## Mistake 4: Not Listening

A vital skill leaders must leverage during crisis is comprehensive listening. They must set aside their egos and be willing to listen to all parties involved. Only through powerful listening can a

leader build the right environment of openness, trust and professionalism necessary to navigate everyone through the crisis. Even the simple act of taking notes (or even assigning a full-time scribe) is an invaluable listening tool that helps a leader assemble and digest the potentially powerful ideas of all involved.

### **Mistake 5: No Communication**

Communication equipment failures commonly occur during crisis (think NYC Fire Department inside the Twin Towers on 9/11, power and cell lines knocked down during Hurricane Katrina). Properly functioning communication equipment; ie, telephones, cell phones, two-ways, internet, text, email, is essential to leading a crisis. Yet the most critical crisis communication breakdowns can be avoided if these risks are assessed and contingency plans put in place before the crisis hits.

Most communication failures are electronic equipment failures, although human communication failures are all too frequent during a crisis. Unclear goals, misunderstood instructions, poor delegation, incomplete feedback systems and lack of decision-making are the core communication failures within most crisis situations. Leaders must focus on crafting and sending clear communications with minimal error for misinterpretation by their supervisors, peers, subordinates, customers, community, or the media. Specific, concise, and action-focused language is essential to effectively connect with everyone impacted by the crisis.

### **Mistake 6: Sticking to the Past**

The very nature of a crisis mandates leaders be open and willing to change fast, to embrace new ways and problem-solving techniques never before imagined on the fly, and to do so without projecting fear. Yet far too often when in the midst of crisis, well-meaning leaders rely on the “ways of yesterday” and let fear distract, or worse, control them. In the end, they fail to objectively find new ways to better respond to today’s immediate crises. Leaders must therefore be adept in when and how: 1, innovate current encumbering systems; 2, create new and flexible systems and 3, effectively use their intuition. By understanding the interconnected roles of innovation, creativity and intuition in a crisis, leaders are better prepared to implement the

best actions for today’s crisis environment.

### **Mistake 7: Too Much Control**

It is only natural for leaders to assume control over a crisis, and, in fact, they should. The problem is when a leader refuses to give up enough control necessary to effectively negate the crisis. The well-documented failure of the then governor of Louisiana to allow the federal government quick access and control over the response efforts after Hurricane Katrina led to much higher levels of destruction. In times of crisis, leaders must create an environment that moves beyond delegation (do what I tell you to do) to emancipation (giving people the freedom to succeed). Proper delegation of the crisis plan and flexibility to adjust as circumstances rapidly change is essential to success.

### **Mistake 8: Failing to Act**

Hesitancy is a powerful enemy of progress. Inappropriate indecision kills a response team’s enthusiasm, motivation, and commitment to succeed. Leaders must therefore have the confidence to make the call, to pull the trigger and do something. People want their leaders to show confidence even when they’re not 100% sure the leader’s decision is the right thing to do. Such a call to action requires real courage, the willingness to act upon your convictions. With a solid plan, surrounded by a well-trained crisis team, leaders are far more likely to take the right action at the right time for the right reasons to be truly courageous in the face of tragedy.

### **Mistake 9: Failing to Lead**

A crisis demands leadership—real leadership. No one can perfectly “manage” a crisis, there are simply too many variables. Only through real leadership (making tough choices, facing opposition, under extreme pressure) does a company, a community or a nation survive. Failure to lead during a crisis is not just a failure— it’s a tragedy. Those in charge must lead the crisis or the crisis will lead them!

### **Mistake 10: Lack of Review**

Most people just want to get through a crisis and forget about it. After cleaning up a semi-tractor trailer full of trash, tree limbs and other debris in the days following Hurricane Ivan, I desperate-

ly wanted to get back my phone lines, my internet connection, the power back for my refrigerator, air conditioning and lights, and put it all behind me! But one of the most powerful learning devices is a post-event analysis or debrief session which is a focused, well-structured, and comprehensive analysis that includes such areas as the efficacy of the original goals and objectives, actions taken, leadership decisions and adjustments made, successes and failures, and perhaps most important, lessons learned to apply into the future. Through a systematic debriefing process, leaders develop themselves and their entire organizations to be better prepared for the next crisis they face.

## **Three Essential Competencies**

In the end, your leadership legacy may be judged by how well you have prepared for and navigated your company through a crisis. Regardless of your initiatives to increase earnings, bolster market share, raise stock prices, re-energize your brand, or innovate new products, most often you will be remembered far more for your ability to navigate through a substantial crisis than for dominating a particular market. It is reassuring to know that the three essential competencies for crisis leadership are exactly the same three skills you need for successful day-to-day corporate leadership. It is also reassuring to know that these three competencies can be learned, honed and elevated within any leader’s current skill set.

The three essential crisis leadership competencies are the ability to **Envision** (to lead from strategy); **Engage** (to lead through people); **Execute** (to lead for transformational results).

Leaders need all three when leading through a crisis. When entire leadership teams are properly trained and equipped with these essentials, they are prepared to face any crisis with high confidence, competence, and commitment. It behooves any forward-thinking leadership team to take its collective crisis leadership skills to a higher level NOW before your next major crisis hits. Assess your risks; prepare for crisis now. Waiting for a better time, or when your “schedule frees up,” may simply be too late. Are you ready?