

# How to Be Prepared When Crisis Strikes

**Once reserved within the imagination of a Hollywood screenwriter or suspense novelist, extreme crises now dominate our daily news headlines.**

Whether we would like to face this new reality or not, the fact is, our society, and the industries that make it great, are routinely susceptible to chemical spills, employee shootings, corporate espionage, product recalls, cyber attacks, and more. Whether around the corner or around the world, these crisis scenarios are now far too common within our increasingly complex, stressful, and dangerous world. Leaders simply cannot assume their current systems, or lack thereof, will protect them when the chips are down.

Perhaps you are one of the more proactive executives, and you've gone so far as to mandate leadership training for your leaders to handle emergencies or disasters. After all, everyone seems to have a leadership program to put your employees through. Leadership books are quite popular – we see them sitting on bookshelves in nearly every office. There is always a seminar to attend.



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There is always a webinar to register for. But are we really prepared? I'm sure we would all like to think we are.

But the numbers tell a different story. Surveys show that more and more of these frightening scenarios frequently weigh on the forefront of a leader's mind. Leaders from all sectors of life 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? Will the seminar you attended last year really make a difference when the next round of layoffs sparks a community-wide protest? Will the protocols in that dusty binder in a drawer somewhere really make a difference when a shooter is reported to be in the plant? Are we really sure we know how to handle the next crisis when it strikes?

## A Shocking Disconnect

In 2011, Talon Leadership conducted a broad industry survey, with particular focus on the chemical, technology, and allied industries. Of the pool of respondents, 65% were senior and mid-level managers and executives.

These were the decision makers upon whose shoulders such decisions and preparations ultimately rested. If anyone in an organization should know the

intricacies and extent of crisis protocols and systems within a company, it was the executives and leaders surveyed by Talon.

Their responses to this survey would reveal the true extent of preparedness in the chemical and allied industries. The results were staggering. When asked if their company merely had a team officially established and in place to handle a crisis, only 20% could reply in the affirmative. Of the 80% who could not answer "yes" to this simple question, half of them did not even know one way or the other! Overall, 40% revealed they did not even know if they had a team in place to address their company's needs in the face of crisis, and 40% had to admit they knew for a fact they did not. This is disturbing, because, in the event of a disaster or emergency, a crisis response team represents the very infrastructure and brain power crucial to managing a crisis.

Even if the companies undergirding our industry have no formal team in place for such a situation, we would expect them to at least have key leaders in place for employees to check in with, and for the media to, look to during a disaster. Yet, in spite of the millions of dollars spent on leadership training, emergency protocol briefings, and management books, half of the executives who responded to the survey revealed they had no clue who in their companies was supposed to execute these key functions when the chips were down. Nearly 65% of them did not even know what their team would be expected to do in any given crisis situation. Not surprisingly, when asked about the level of confidence today's executives had in their company's ability to effectively handle a crisis, 70% of them could not say they were confident.

It's not that organizations in the 21st century no longer experience loss or emergency. On the contrary, Talon's survey revealed that a profound number of

companies in the chemical, technology, and allied industries have experienced catastrophic dilemmas in their histories.

A surprisingly high number of them had experienced boycotts, natural disasters, chemical spills, government investigations, plant explosions, and more – just in the last three years.

### The Typical Mistakes

It is a fact of our modern reality that crisis will strike. It's not a matter of if, but when. But in light of the revealing results of the Talon survey, it's easy to see why so many crises spiral out of control and result in more damage and negative press than is necessary.

We can minimize the frequency of incidents our organizations encounter, but we cannot completely eliminate crises from our lives. Therefore, it is imperative that we minimize their impact. The Talon survey revealed that emergencies caused an immense amount of damage – from millions of dollars from the bottom line to broken supply chains to extremely long recovery times.

To minimize the residual effects of crises, it is crucial that we identify the most common mistakes leaders make and understand the proper ways to avoid these mistakes. The typical response to crisis is often devastatingly tragic. The average executive in the chemical, technology, or allied industries – even though he may have attended standard leadership training or even a crisis management workshop – does not know how to react. His average crisis preparedness leaves him with no ability to address a crisis on an instinctive level. Let's look at some of the most common pitfalls characteristic of typical leaders today, so we may better understand the practical mechanisms for preparing for and handling 21st-century emergencies.

#### Mistake #1: Failure to plan

The most frightening and common mistake leaders make is to have no plan or template to follow before, during, or even after a crisis occurs. During a crisis, a leader must align three critical strategic elements: the Goals, the People, and the Resources. The goals define the

“What” – 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” – which the leaders will use as they apply all the various tangible and intangible resources available to them to meet the goals.

#### Mistake #2: Failure to determine and follow a hierarchy

One of the most critical aspects of successful crisis navigation is to determine and follow a proper hierarchy of executive and field leadership. 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 crisis hits, something as simple as a basic “Call Down List” of who to call, what is their responsibility, and how to reach them is critically important during a crisis.

Mistake #3: Failure to be visible, present, and attentive

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 that you can call the 4 Cs of crisis leadership:

**Colleagues** (crisis team and employees),

**Customers,**

**Constituents** (vendors, stockholders, suppliers), and

**Communities** (cities served, local and national media).

#### Mistake #4: Failure to listen and comprehend

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: Failure to effectively communicate

Typical communication failures during a crisis are electronic equipment failures, although human communication failures are also all too frequent during a crisis.

Unclear goals, misunderstood instructions, poor delegation, incomplete feedback systems – lack of decision-making – these are the core communication failures within most crisis situations. Leaders must therefore continually focus on crafting and sending clear, unambiguous communications with minimal error for misinterpretation by their supervisors, peers, subordinates, customers, community, or the media.

#### Mistake #6: Failure to try new things

The very nature of a crisis mandates leaders be open and willing to change fast, to embrace new ways on the fly and problemsolving techniques never before imagined without projecting fear. Yet far too often when in the midst of crisis, well-meaning leaders overly rely on the “ways of yesterday” and let fear distract, or worse, control them.

Leaders must be adept in knowing when and how to

(1) *innovate current encumbering systems,*

(2) *create new and more flexible systems, and*

(3) *effectively use their intuition. Through an understanding of the interconnected roles of innovation, creativity, and intuition in a crisis, leaders are much better prepared to implement the best actions for today's crisis environment.*

## Mistake #7: Failure to give up 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. 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: Failure to act

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: Failure 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, etc.) 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: Failure to debrief

Most people just want to get through a crisis and forget about it. But ask anyone – from a firefighter, to a navy seal, to a fighter jet pilot – and they will unanimously agree that one of the most powerful learning devices they

integrate into their professional lives is a post-event analysis often called a “Debrief Session.” A “Debrief Session” 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.

## A Timely Solution

In the end, your leadership legacy may ultimately be judged by how well you have prepared for and navigated your company through a crisis. Regardless of the initiatives you have introduced 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.

Yet, it is reassuring to know 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 these three competencies can be learned, honed, and elevated within any leader's current skill set. As Talon analyzed the results of their survey discussed earlier, three essential leadership competency needs materialized.

Distilled to the core of the matter, leaders who seek to excel in a crisis must master these three abilities:

1. Envision: the ability to lead from strategy
2. Engage: the ability to lead through people
3. Execute: the ability to lead for transformational results

A leader needs all three to be highly effective. They particularly 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 therefore behooves any forward-thinking leadership team to take their collective crisis leadership skills to a higher level NOW before the next major crisis hits.

Without a doubt, the best mechanism to equip professionals and executives across the board is one that instills instinctive excellence. The three essential leadership competencies are not a checklist to be consulted when the chips are down. That's not how this works. Today's lack of preparedness and quality crisis training has left the industry vulnerable and precarious – in many cases resulting in scandal, severe loss of revenue, and even permanent damage. Sitting through another run-of-them-all leadership seminar won't fix this.

Armed with the data from their groundbreaking survey, Talon assembled a team of experts from Homeland Security, the US Military, the FBI, Secret Service, and top Fortune 500 corporate leaders with the experience and perspective to craft something different – something immersive and interactive that would mirror the sort of training in use by the CIA, first responders, and the most successful and resilient corporations. The idea was to approach crisis training, not from merely an informational perspective, but also a reactionary or instinctive perspective.

In a crisis, when the heat is up, all those great books you read go out the window. You need a second nature to kick in and a process to fall back on. And who better to go to for such instinctive crisis training than people who have managed extreme crises for a living?

Talon's team of experts discovered that this sort of immersive, real-time, interactive training model was relatively unheard of in the corporate world, and thus created what would come to be known as the Talon Leadership Challenge. The experience they crafted incorporated a myriad of tools, utilizing both conventional crisis leadership methods and groundbreaking processes only recently developed. Particular benefits and lessons attendees learn in this type of training include:

- How to harness Gen X and Gen Y creative problemsolving.
- Simple processes to align goals, people, and resources.

- Differences between creativity, innovation, and intuition in problem solving.
- How to be calm in your communication during a black swan.
- Individual leadership styles compared with that of prominent, national leaders.
- When leaders should trust their instincts and intuition.
- Why leaders must inspect execution.
- Why a 5-step debrief process is so vital.
- How to engage the media when “no comment” is not an option.
- How a media center should be created.
- Impromptu leadership communication skills
- How to avoid personality clashes and power trips when the chips are down.

The 21st century is filled with crises, and today’s successful leaders must evolve with the times. Outdated emergency management attitudes and preconceptions are no longer effective.

When 70% of industry professionals do not feel confident to lead in a crisis, we must take the measures necessary to ensure crisis management training is enhanced, updated, more immersive, and focused on instincts and reactions rather than protocols and hotel-lobby seminars. The results of this pioneering collaboration and the ground-breaking training it produced have been amazing. Professionals at all levels of the corporate ladder within the chemical, technology, and allied industries report added confidence, smoother crisis handling, and enhanced reflexes and instincts.

This is how crisis training will be done in the 21st century. This is how successful leaders will excel in modern crises.