

Leading in a crisis

Surviving today to do it all again tomorrow

By Karen Green with Anna Waters and Anna Byrne
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The real test of leadership is not how you act when everything is working well, but how you respond during the toughest of times.

From a system perspective, a crisis, in itself, doesn't actually break things; instead, it highlights any weaknesses and gaps that already exist and amplifies their impact. We also see this with leaders; a crisis very quickly highlights where there are gaps in leadership and management skills. These gaps can break a business if they aren't managed. Similarly, the way a leader responds during a crisis can often win them respect as a good leader or fix their reputation as a poor one.

If only each crisis came with a cheat guide and crystal ball to help you navigate through it! The inconvenient reality is that, while we can have guidelines and protocols in place to prevent or reduce a crisis, very few crises can be planned. Each one brings unique problems and challenges, requiring us to adapt and stretch outside of skills that we may not have used before.

As the world responds to COVID-19, the unpredictable nature of the pandemic means that leaders have had limited time (at best) to prepare. The stakes have also rarely been higher – many businesses are already taking drastic measures in the hopes of helping their organisation survive, feeling like it's a 'do or die' scenario.

Inevitably, this is catalysing wide-sweeping reinvention. A powerful thing that happens in a high-stakes crisis: suddenly, everything becomes focused on one single point and the business evolves to support rapid, agile working groups as everyone tries to address facets of the problem. As many leaders are noting, businesses are changing 'at pace' in ways they never would have thought possible.

The usual red tape and barriers that get in the way become less important and are more easily circumvented when in the face of survival. Things that made no sense before can be swept away and redefined.

As the situation unfolds, many leaders are describing themselves as being in a cycle of anxiety and fear, bouncing variably between underreacting and overreacting as they try to make good decisions and function well. The happy middle ground of constructive focus seems decidedly elusive.

This particular crisis is also deeply personal. While many leaders have concerns about their work, team and organisation, they are simultaneously worried about parents, children, partners, friends and their wider community. You can feel yourself moving between rational and survival responses as you grip onto multiple roller coasters – all of which impacts how we're 'showing up', moment by moment.

Given that a leader has the power and influence to sink a business or lift it from the ashes, what can we do to help ourselves navigate the chaos? How do we stay rational? and remain present and bring the best versions of ourselves as we respond to this crisis?

1 'Keep perspective' (and treat it like oxygen)



It's critical that leaders keep perspective as the size and scale of a crisis emerges around them. Finding the measured response and building plans for the future is hard and it requires 'cognitive juice'. Clear, calm responses are compromised (and can even feel impossible) when you are struggling to get your own internal mind under control.

and breathe

When unexpected things happen, it's the response we 'choose' that can be the difference between surviving and thriving.

As a leader, your best value add will come through perspective. Otherwise, it's like a runner attempting a marathon without oxygen (hint: they don't get very far).

We can shape our perspective in a meaningful way by gathering and evaluating the facts at hand then use them to frame decisions and plan of attack. In an emerging crisis, you need to work with what you have knowing that you might not ever have a sense of the full picture. While this can feel uncomfortable, those who 'wait for clarity' will be in a far worse position than those who focus on 'creating clarity' and actively shaping the unfolding situation.

Another key part of keeping perspective is remembering that you are, after all, human. As you help your people and business stay calm and focus on the next task, make sure you do the same for yourself. Create small windows regularly to step back from the frontline and 'check your own oxygen tank'.



Actions you can take to keep perspective:

- ✔ Notice and label emotions you're experiencing to reduce their noise and power. To do this, simply name the feeling as specifically as you can (e.g. Rather than 'concerned', are you feeling anxious, sad, disappointed, anticipation, agitated, confusion, uncertain, apprehensive? Or, more likely, is it a cocktail of different emotions? Being more specific will help your brain adjust and shift.).
- ✔ List the facts, without magnifying them (and be considered in where you source your data: is it a credible, reliable source?).
- ✔ Consciously choose the emotional response you want (i.e. once you've identified how you feel, then identify how you would prefer to be feeling. It also helps to then identify one thing you could do to shift towards that preferred state).

- ✔ Talk to someone outside of your immediate system. Pick someone that will play the role of an active listener. (Don't use someone that loves to expand on the drama!)
- ✔ Practice self-care. Take time for you to 'fill up your own cup'. Simple things such as breathing, short walks and listening to music can be profoundly powerful.
- ✔ Ask yourself this question (and give yourself time to sit with it before answering): 'If tomorrow morning you woke up, and the answer to how to respond was magically waiting on your desk, what would be the first action you would take? What would be the second?'

2 Create calm among the chaos



A workplace can very quickly descend into chaos. Emotions start running high and stress and fear come to the forefront. If this happens, a leader must take control and stop the spread; this both prevents the 'emotional contagion effect' and sets the tone for what happens next. This steadying guidance is often the first thing a leader has to do when news of a crisis breaks.

Some of the ways you bring calm into chaos are to act quickly and assign/delegate response tasks to your staff. This gives people a focus on where they can contribute, which in turn lowers their reactivity. Don't let the workplace slide into a panic (even senior leadership groups can descend surprisingly quickly into reactive chaos). As the leader, you need to bring a sense of order to the room. When emotions run high, and people are descending into panic, bring the room back to why we're here, what's in our control and how we'll need to work together.

Choose where you invest energy – control the controllable.

Things you can do for your staff

- ✓ **Bring order to the room.** Emphasise why we're here, what is clear/isn't changing, what's in our control, and how we'll need to work together.
- ✓ **Create immediate clarity.** Use delegation and clear instructions to create structure and give people a sense of purpose (in the short-term).
- ✓ **Give people a focus.** Help people cut through the chaos and discern what the next step/task is.
- ✓ **Timebox emotional sharing.** Listen to concerns and create space to share openly about how everyone is going (from both work and personal perspective), but timebox it.
- ✓ **Curate team inputs.** Be conscious and considered about how and when new information about the situation is shared. Encourage staff to avoid social media and news updates for large chunks of the day so they minimise their turns on the roller coaster.



Things you can do for yourself

- ✓ Find a peer that can be your **chaos debrief buddy**. Someone outside of your business is best as they can be rational when you are emotionally 'triggered' and you can do the same for them. Once you've debriefed, take turns to identify what you are grateful for (rather than just focus on the negative).
- ✓ Take regular **moments to be mindful**. Close your eyes for 10 seconds and take three deep breaths (especially if feeling particularly emotional or reactive).
- ✓ Commence **crisis planning**. A useful approach can be to identify potential triggers that would mean you need to adjust the current course. Work through them to identify what you would do if each eventuated (e.g. What will be our stage one response, stage two etc?). This can help escalation decision-making and confidence in options (try to avoid the temptation to control the crisis, which is outside of your influence, and focus on what you can do. Timebox the scenario planning and lift out once this task is complete and observe the world and respond – as in a complex system).
- ✓ Do the **self-care basics well**. Healthy eating, getting enough sleep, daily movement and drinking plenty of water are common sense but they often slip when we're feeling stressed.
- ✓ **Limit chaos updates** from the media to fixed times each day (e.g. 10 minutes in the morning and 10 minutes in the evening) rather than rolling coverage. This helps limit the fight or flight response triggers – so encourage your team to do the same!



3 Demonstrate confidence and be authentic

The most important thing a leader can do in times of crisis is to bring confidence and stability. Fear and unease will do more harm to your business (and faster) than any contagious disease. Leading and surviving in a crisis requires us not only to be able to face the reality of the cold hard facts, but to pair that with hope and sureness that we will create a new future. During a crisis, everybody looks to the leader for the next step, a sense of stability and reassurance it will be okay. You're like the canary in the corporate coal mine – people will look to you to gauge how they should react. If a leader projects their fears and anxieties, that spreads to everyone else – we know emotions are contagious.

Don't look to your employees for reassurance; seek that support through your chaos debrief buddy or a peer support network. It's critical that you don't shift the fear downward. While you're almost guaranteed to have genuine concerns, you can choose to express those in a conscious and considered way.

Paired with confidence, a leader needs to be authentic in their response. This means walking a fine line between being transparent (by providing accurate and up-to-date information) and overwhelming teams with worst-case scenarios.

Leaders who aren't authentic quickly lose credibility. For example, some leaders might respond to a crisis by stating that 'everything is going to be fine' – when it clearly won't be for some. A leader treads a delicate balance when relating the scale of the situation. Overstating or understating the magnitude of the challenge can materially damage your ability to move into the recovery phase and damage people's trust in your decisions.

(Importantly, withholding or being too selective about information distribution creates its own challenges. In a crisis, information inevitably emerges down the track... at which point, the timing of the release is assessed just as closely as accuracy.)

Ultimately, this is a judgement call. Make sure you invest the time and effort to work out how you tread the line.

Being transparent and honest doesn't equate to unloading everything for all to see.



In a crisis, you rarely have all the information. But it's more important to take action than to be certain.

Summary of things you can do

- ☑ Be careful not to overstate or understate the magnitude of the crisis. Make sure you're across the facts from reputable sources.
- ☑ Model confidence in your actions to your stakeholders, team and customers.
- ☑ Don't dump your fear on your team. Use your chaos debrief buddy to help you process the mess and talk through next steps.
- ☑ Be honest and timely in sharing information. Consciously choose when, what and how to share it.
- ☑ Don't speculate on the drama (or buy into the gossip/story). Listen and empathise and help your people think through things for themselves.

4 Take a decisive (and adaptable) approach



During crises, leaders will have to make rapid and often unpopular decisions. This is often at odds with how a leader might usually prefer to make decisions. Unlike business-as-usual, there may be no time to talk with everyone to ponder the pros and cons of a decision at a comfortable pace. Leaders who are willing to take action and pivot quickly, who are decisive and flexible, are going to have more success surviving the crisis than a leader who waits and doesn't take action. Equally, leaders need to be willing to put their own egos at the door and let other people's ideas, thoughts and suggestions flow.

There's no doubt you'll have challenging decisions to make, and often the way you communicate those will shape how people respond, rather than the content itself. For many leaders, you'll be making very challenging decisions every day. In the end, during a crisis, you're rarely making decisions others like but be kind to yourself while you make them.

Summary of things you can do

- ☑ You can't keep everyone happy with the decisions you need to make. Set a different benchmark/standard for yourself – did you make the best decision you could with the information you had?
- ☑ Be kind to yourself in the process. Remember, you're human and doing the best you can!
- ☑ Be flexible and adaptable. Things change quickly in a crisis, requiring quick pivots and responses – feeling locked into one future won't help you adapt as needed.
- ☑ Scenario planning doesn't then become a step-by-step guide book.
- ☑ Keep your ego out of it.
- ☑ Learn from your previous decisions, but don't berate yourself if things turn out unexpectedly (i.e. don't beat yourself up with hindsight). Take on the lesson and move forward.
- ☑ People respond best when they see your empathy, compassion and humanity – so don't lose this in translation.





5 Leverage the power of the team

As an individual, no matter how brilliant you are, a crisis is likely to test your capacity. The very nature of the situation means a single leader's cognitive load will rapidly be reached – so you need to shift responsibility from your shoulders to your team's.

As we noted above, the power of delegation is key – particularly in the early stages of the chaos.

As time progresses, look for opportunities to shift from directing to empowering the team. Again, this is a judgement call – but it's an important shift to make for the long-term (remember: a crisis is usually a marathon, not a sprint).

Additionally, as your organisation inevitably pivots, capture the 'bright spots' that emerge in the collective response. With people working together, showcase the achievements that sharpened focus and collaborative effort have driven with survival as a motivating incentive. Tell the stories of success in a way that invigorates the wider organisation. Remember, how the business responds now will become the myths and legends of your future organisation.

As an individual, your cognitive capacity has a ceiling. With the right ingredients, you can access and unleash the power of the team.

Summary of things you can do

- ✓ **Delegate, delegate, delegate.** Work hard to give clear instructions and practice good delegation.
- ✓ **Look for the shift** when the team moves from panic to being able to work constructively with you.
- ✓ Build **regular feedback mechanisms** into the process so everyone feels they're in the loop as things unfold. Don't keep it all to yourself.
- ✓ **Capture the fundamentals.** Make sure you have simple, yet clear, ways of capturing key decisions and risks as they evolve. This means everyone can access them (if clarity is needed) and there's no 'single point of dependency' (i.e. in your head!).
- ✓ **Showcase success.** Celebrate achievements with your team – however small – and tell the story of how the business is making the impossible happen.

Crisis isn't easy.

But it's the time when leaders have the most opportunity (in an incredibly short time) to stretch into a different space and have the greatest impact. At the same time, there's rarely a clear or right answer. The best thing you can do is make sure you're in the best space you can be and do the best you can with what's in front of you. That's all anyone can ever ask.

About the authors



Karen Green
Managing Director, CorMentis Consulting
(Masters HRM)

Karen runs a Singapore-based consultancy that specialises in applying behavioural science, leadership theory and organisational design to today's multi-faceted work environment.

For over 20 years, Karen has been helping leaders and teams to understand their complex business systems and to break down barriers that inhibit high performance and innovation. She has a particular interest in coaching leaders through challenging situations, helping them to make the best decisions they can for both the business and their people.

Karen brings a passion for helping teams to gathering the collective wisdom in the group and using it to drive innovation and outcomes.



Anna Byrne
Partner, NeuroPower Group
(BA (Pol Sci), LLB (Hons), Dip Psych)

As a behavioural strategist, Anna B specialises in solving complex people challenges and shaping mindsets, decisions and behaviours (using a combination of neuroscience, neuropsychology and behavioural economics).

She works as a strategic advisor to boards, CEOs and leaders, helping them navigate unprecedented situations and translate big aspirations into practical reality. This has included working at the 'strategic coal-face' on volatile crisis projects with high stakes, heavy media scrutiny/public attention and direct impacts for large workforces (5,000 – 80,000 staff).

Anna is also co-author of Behavioural Economics for Business (launched at the World Bank in 2016) and co-host of the podcast Boardroom hustle.



Anna Waters
Chief Operating Officer, NeuroPower Group
(MOrgPsyc BA (Hons) MAPS)

Anna W specialises in applying research and insights from organisational psychology and neuroscience to effect behaviour change that drives positive social impact and organisational performance. She has 10 years' experience working in multi-disciplinary teams to deliver results in complex and critical environments. She has extensive experience in best practice culture change, strategy, engagement and leadership initiatives.

Anna is a registered psychologist and is a postgraduate guest lecturer at Griffith University, Queensland in organisational cognitive neuroscience.