



When everything breaks: three guiding principles for leading through crisis

Insight

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Crises are the purest test of leadership. One minute, your business is humming; the next, your systems are down, your customers are panicking, and your board is calling every five minutes.

Every crisis feels unique – a cyberattack, a reputational hit, a product failure, a leadership scandal – but beneath the surface, the same dynamics are always at play. Time compresses. Information fragments. Emotions spike. The physics of pressure take over: the harder you try to control it, the more it exposes what's already true about your culture and your leadership.

Over years of watching organizations navigate these moments – some collapsing, others transforming – three universal principles emerge. They're not steps in a playbook; they're disciplines. They define how great leaders think, act, and communicate when everything breaks.

1. Slow down to speed up

When a crisis hits, the instinct is to move fast – to issue statements, make calls, approve fixes, and show action. But haste without orientation amplifies damage. The best crisis leaders create a moment of stillness in the storm – not to hesitate, but to regain clarity before motion.

In April 2017, United Airlines found itself in a global media firestorm after security officers forcibly removed a paying passenger from an overbooked flight in Chicago. Within hours, videos of the passenger being dragged down the aisle had gone viral. Instead of pausing to orient to the full facts or consider the emotional optics, United's leadership reacted defensively. The first statement described the passenger as "disruptive and belligerent" and characterized the event as an effort to "re-accommodate" customers. The tone was procedural, not human – and the public backlash was immediate. Within two days, United's market value dropped nearly \$1 billion, and the CEO was forced into multiple rounds of apologies.[1]

The crisis wasn't defined by the initial incident but by the speed and insensitivity of the response. A short pause for deliberation – one that prioritized empathy, stakeholder perception, and long-term trust over immediate damage control – could have changed the story entirely.

Contrast that with the 2010 Chilean mine collapse, one of the most remarkable crisis turnarounds in modern history. When 33 miners were trapped 2,300 feet underground, President Sebastián Piñera and Mining Minister Laurence Golborne faced enormous pressure to act quickly. Instead, they imposed a disciplined command structure and insisted that every decision be grounded in data. Engineers modeled drilling options, geologists mapped escape routes, and communications teams provided daily transparent briefings. Piñera personally reviewed technical reports before authorizing each step. That deliberate, data-driven approach transformed chaos into coordination. Seventy days later, all 33 miners were rescued alive – a global symbol of competence and composure under pressure.[2]

Lesson Learned: Great leaders manage time differently. They slow down when everyone else is accelerating. In a crisis, the first few minutes define the next few months.

2. Lead with radical transparency

In a crisis, uncertainty is inevitable – but opacity is optional. The fastest way to lose trust is to pretend you have all the answers when you don't. People can handle bad news; they can't handle not knowing.

When Johnson & Johnson faced the Tylenol poisonings in 1982, CEO James Burke made one of the most courageous decisions in corporate history. Seven people had died after taking cyanide-laced capsules, and the FBI initially suspected internal sabotage. Instead of deflecting blame or waiting for legal clarity, Burke ordered a nationwide recall of 31 million bottles – costing over \$100 million in lost revenue. He appeared on national television to share facts directly with the public, set up consumer hotlines, and maintained constant transparency with regulators and employees. Within months, J&J reintroduced Tylenol with tamper-proof packaging and quickly regained market leadership. That openness became the benchmark for crisis communication.[3]

Contrast that with Volkswagen's 2015 Dieselgate scandal. When regulators discovered that VW had installed software to cheat emissions tests on 11 million vehicles, the company's early statements minimized the issue. Executives referred vaguely to "technical irregularities," avoiding direct admission. By the time the full scope of the deception emerged, the crisis had morphed from a compliance failure into a moral indictment. Volkswagen paid more than \$30 billion in fines and settlements, but the greater cost was reputational: a brand once synonymous with trust and engineering precision became shorthand for corporate deceit.[4]

Lesson Learned: Transparency isn't about optics – it's about velocity. Tell the truth faster than rumor can spread, and you turn fear into confidence.

3. Protect trust at all costs

Trust is the ultimate currency in a crisis. It's what holds your team together when the facts are ugly, and it's what determines whether stakeholders believe your recovery story. Every decision – what to say, who to tell, when to act – either builds or erodes that trust.

During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern modeled what trust-based leadership looks like. She held daily briefings that were factual, empathetic, and accessible – even broadcasting live on social media to reach citizens directly. She didn't overpromise or minimize risk; she was honest about uncertainty while explaining the reasoning behind each public-health measure. Her tone was calm, human, and consistent. The result: remarkably high levels of public confidence and compliance, even through lockdowns and economic strain. Ardern's leadership became a case study in how transparency and empathy can sustain trust under extreme pressure.[5]

The opposite dynamic unfolded in BP's 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster. When the oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 workers and spilling millions of barrels of crude, BP initially downplayed the scale – claiming 1,000 barrels per day were leaking when the real number exceeded 60,000. Executives shifted blame between contractors, and CEO Tony Hayward worsened the backlash by telling reporters, "I'd like my life back." The remark crystallized public outrage. By the time BP fully accepted responsibility, the company's moral authority to lead its recovery had vanished.[6]

Lesson Learned: *Control is temporary, but trust endures. You can rebuild a business; you can't rebuild credibility once it's lost.*

After the storm

Crises don't just test leadership – they reveal it. They expose whether your organization defaults to clarity or confusion, transparency or protection, values or self-interest.

You don't rise to the occasion; you fall to your level of preparation. But preparation isn't a binder on a shelf – it's a mindset built on these three disciplines: slow down to speed up, lead with radical transparency, and protect trust at all costs. Those are the constants when everything else is breaking.

Stay tuned for a deeper look into how organizations can operationalize these principles – developing crisis playbooks, decision frameworks, and communication systems that turn chaos into composure. Because while every crisis is unique, the physics of leadership under pressure never change.

Endnotes

1. Harvard Business School Case W18124, United Airlines: The Flight 3411 Debacle, April 2018; BBC News, “United Airlines: Passenger forcibly removed from flight,” April 2017.
2. La Nación, “El rescate de los 33 mineros: cómo Chile enfrentó una tragedia con liderazgo y ciencia,” October 2010; The Guardian, “Chile mine rescue: the world watches the miracle unfold,” October 2010.
3. New York Times, “Johnson & Johnson Acts to Protect Its Reputation,” October 1982.
4. Reuters, “Volkswagen to pay \$30 billion in Dieselgate fallout,” June 2018.
5. The Lancet, “Jacinda Ardern: A Model of Crisis Leadership,” 2020; BBC News, “How New Zealand’s Prime Minister won trust in a crisis,” May 2020.
6. U.S. Federal Commission Report, Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling, January 2011; Washington Post, “BP’s missteps in crisis communication,” May 2010.