

In a Crisis, Great Leaders Prioritize Listening

by Erika James and Lynn Perry Wooten

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Summary. Since 2020, leaders have had to navigate large changes and crises whose effects, especially without proper crisis leadership, are still being felt today. How did those that managed to succeed during this time do it? The authors argue that effective crisis leadership... [more](#)

How leaders navigate a crisis — big or small — has an enormous influence over the impact that crisis will have on their organization, not to mention the personal impact it will have on the people and leadership of that organization, in its aftermath.

The pandemic — a crisis on a global scale — created a series of smaller crises for organizations worldwide. Some floundered at this immediate disruption. Others emerged more resilient than before.

The airline industry was hit hard in the early days of the pandemic and most companies continue to grapple with the fallout — some more successfully than others. Delta Airlines, for instance, earned kudos for its handling of the Covid-19 crisis. Under the stewardship of CEO Ed Bastian, Delta took proactive measures to prioritize customer safety. In 2020, the airline hired U.S. healthcare and research giant, the Mayo Clinic, to advise on virus-related cleaning and ventilation protocols, and in-flight social distancing. Bastian went on to hire Mayo's Henry Ting, a celebrated cardiologist, as Delta's Chief Health Officer in 2021. Ting in turn has continued to lead Delta's efforts to safeguard the wellbeing of passengers and staff. Among the initiatives he oversees are ending the mandate on mask-wearing as the pandemic recedes, and the provision of 24-hour mental health and counseling services to employees facing exhaustion and burnout in its wake. Delta has been commended by academics and the media as a company that navigated the storm of Covid-19 with acuity; its CEO cited as an example of strong leadership in a crisis.

Delta isn't the only one that picked up praise for its pandemic-era efforts. Adam Silver of the National Basketball Association made headlines when he stopped play in 2020 — a bold decision that cost the NBA \$190 million in lost revenue — and created an exclusion zone or "bubble," arresting the spread of the virus among players and fans. Silver has been lauded as an example of what good leadership looks like in a crisis.

What do Adam Silver and Ed Bastian have in common? What is it about their leadership that helps their organizations brace for impact, contain damage, drive recovery and build resilience

ahead of shocks? When crises land, Silver and Bastian do one simple yet powerful thing: they seek out and act on the counsel of *other people*. And lots of them.

Human beings are imperfectly equipped to make rational decisions, and even less so when something as unexpected and devastating as a pandemic hits us. We are each of us prone to certain ways of thinking — heuristics and biases that are hard-wired into our behavior — which make it hard for us as individuals to see all the edges of a crisis, to understand its mutability, to chart all the possibilities (the opportunities as well as the risks) and to decide on the best course of action. We tend to downplay or dismiss threats along the lines of “it’ll never happen to me, and even if it does, it won’t be that bad.” And when the chips finally do fall, we can become anchored to one particular plan or solution, even as the crisis shifts or changes direction. We may continue down one path long after it makes sense to do so, because of sunk costs: “we’ve come this far; it’s too late to change course.”

Then there’s the echo chamber. Whether we know it or not, most of us gravitate to people (and information) that confirm things we already think and believe. We’re drawn to individuals and ideas that concur with, and even end up shaping, our worldview. The pandemic era has revealed worrying fault lines in the U.S. and elsewhere. Intensifying political schisms, social unrest, and general divisiveness point to massive-scale confirmation bias — a vast shoring up of beliefs along socio-economic and racial lines that have created a crisis of polarization.

Breaking out of the echo chamber and correcting for preconceptions isn’t intuitive nor is it easy. But it’s essential in a crisis, because a crisis is hard to predict and understand in all of its dimensions. A crisis seldom plays by your established rulebook or existing structures. Unchecked, a crisis can evolve, expand and engulf in ways we will struggle to imagine or anticipate. For this

reason, when a crisis hits, you need your leadership to be as bias-free, elastic, deft and dynamic as the circumstances rapidly unfolding around you and your organization.

Perspective-taking in a crisis

A good leader knows that you can't do it alone. It takes a team to provide the input to forge a vision, create a strategy, and execute that strategy successfully. A good crisis leader knows that when the road gets bumpy, you need a team; but you also need that team to provide or source as many different perspectives on your situation as possible. Perspective-taking is a critical skill in crisis management. The more eyes you have on the situation, the less likely it is that you will remain entrenched in your own thinking or anchored to one solution or plan. And the more people you can turn to for counsel as the crisis develops, the easier it will be to shift course and adapt as exigencies dictate.

Consider this quote from Ed Bastian talking to HBR in January 2022: "We get information from so many people all the time ... I only use a single email and people know it, and so I get probably thousands of emails a day of all varieties of something that had happened that went wrong, of something that went great, and please thank that employee, of ideas and opportunities," he said. "I want to make sure that I'm accessible for anyone who has good ideas."

Perspective-taking is also about learning.

Here's Walgreen-Boots Alliance CEO, Roz Brewer, talking to HBR about the importance of learning from others, particularly when walking into a new role or organization mid-crisis: "Whenever I take on a new role, I become a real student of the business...I meet people...I really put myself in a learning position and not in a position initially of leadership, and I chose to learn and be an advocate and open-minded about what the opportunities were ahead of me."

Learning, says Brewer, is about listening — and being purposeful about listening. Here’s what she has to say about it: “I already had the practice of never walking into a retail unit as leader (with my) mobile device out. I never do that. I either leave it in my automobile or put it in my pocket, because I need to be present, I need to listen ... And I think that’s the next level of leadership ... listening and acting and making people feel included in the environments that we create, as leaders.”

And of course, many companies didn’t fare well in 2020. There are scores of firms from multiple sectors who fared poorly, who struggled to stay afloat, or found themselves facing reputational crises as a result of poor decision-making. Think of meat-packer Tyson Foods who hit headlines by failing to protect workers effectively in the first wave of Covid. Or CrossFit, whose CEO’s racist tweets in the wake of George Floyd’s murder ousted him from the top job, and saw the company sold at a loss.

Effective leadership in a crisis can make all the difference to its outcomes and post-crisis outlook. And this is why it’s vital that, as a leader, you do as much as possible to guard against the cognitive traps and pitfalls that impair rational decision-making, bind your understanding or undermine your ability to see the bigger picture.

So how do you ensure you leverage the perspective of others now, before the next crisis hits you and your organization? Here are three questions to ask yourself:

1. Do you currently have access to diverse voices and sources of information within your team or organization, or even beyond its boundaries?

Think about the whole of your business and ask yourself if you have real visibility of what’s happening on the ground as well as the boardroom. Determine where the blind spots might be, or if there are gaps in the flow of communication that could allow for a

smoldering crisis to take hold. Something that might help here is scenario-planning with your team. In the event of crises A,B or C, whose knowledge or expertise might you need — and can you currently access this?

2. Do you routinely build other team members' ideas or feedback into your decision-making?

Be honest about this. How amenable are you to other people's input? And do you always seek the same counsel or are you open to hearing from a diversity of input? Something we have seen in our research is that effective crisis leaders are those who know how to defer to expertise wherever it surfaces within an organization or even externally. Think again about Ed Bastian and Adam Silver and how they looked to medical know-how from outside their own or their organizations' fields, and ask yourself: Would you do the same?

3. What systems or processes might you need to put into place to surface and capture multi-stakeholder perspectives?

Look at how communication is structured in your organization and whether there are silos that you need to address. Is the flow of knowledge multilateral? How might you ensure you hear voices other than those of your immediate team. In the age of Zoom and Teams, the workplace has become meeting-intensive, so what other mechanisms might you use to capture good ideas from a diversity of perspectives?

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Remember, crises are inevitable. Even as we weather the longtail of Covid-19, new clouds are already gathering — you may be grappling with something in your organization right now. How you fare in the next crisis, whether you fail to contain the damage or realize the opportunities to emerge more resilient than before, will depend on the agency of your leadership. If you don't make judicious use of *all the information* you need to determine *all of*

the losses and gains that crises foreshadow, you'll leave yourself and your organization in the dark when you most need to see light at the end of the tunnel.

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