

Leading Through Troubled Times: Information for Supervisors, Managers, and Executives

By Linda Simmons

Leaders have a significant role in creating the state of mind that is society.
—John Gardner

man•ag•er *n.* a person who is in charge of the affairs of a business.

cri•sis *n.* a decisive or critical moment.

When most supervisors and managers join the ranks of corporate leadership, it is with an eye toward shepherding resources, marshalling teams, and streamlining tasks. Yet, although we are formally schooled in the tools and processes of business, most of us learn that leading through a crisis or troubled times is unscripted, unnerving, and usually a defining moment in our career.

A business crisis can come in many forms, some internal to the organization (i.e., downsizing, financial woes, product recall) and some environmental or precipitated by external events (i.e., oil embargo, recession, natural disasters, acts of war). I define troubled times as any internal or externally prompted circumstances that impact the health or routine of the organization.

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The terrorist activities of September 11, 2001, place today's business supervisors, managers, and leaders in an unprecedented position: managing through one of the most dramatic combinations of economic and emotional crises in U.S. business history.
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In 1986, the explosion of the U.S. space shuttle *Challenger* prompted a myriad of emotional reactions but did not unduly disrupt the fabric of business or the U.S. economy. When tragic events are national in scope and have economic repercussions, they become the focal point of employee concerns and business decision making.

What can a manager realistically do to help individuals and the organization weather the storm? I posed that question and others to several of Lore International Institute's most senior consultants. The information and advice that I received reveal practical and humane actions that managers can take in troubled times. Most of us are not professional counselors, so it's important to understand the nature of human behavior in unsettled times, and to be aware of appropriate assistance that we can and should provide. As Lore associate Mary Key explains, "We can't only address the bottom line. We must include the human line. More than ever, managers are being asked to respond to the human side of work and hear real life concerns. Building team is about honoring all aspects of our lives."

Six things you should know and do as a manager.

Although they are numb, many employees are really suffering from what the experts in an MSNBC story call “a normal reaction to an abnormal event,” and they will recover over the next few weeks. “The challenge,” says Lore senior consultant Donna Deeds, “is to know when we have provided enough time for discussion and mourning, and when it is time to move forward. Employees that have experienced personal success in dealing with major crisis (death, divorce, loss of job, etc.) will draw upon those past successes to give them comfort that ‘Yes, I can live through this just like I did before.’”

1. Communicate often and honestly.

Acknowledging the events and their impact is key. When employees are centrally located, getting together as a group is often the best approach. Lore Organizational Learning and Effectiveness consultant Anna Pool recommends a dialog that is based on William Bridges’ model for change. “Take time to acknowledge what has happened, what has changed, and even what has been lost. Acknowledge what Bridges calls the Neutral Zone, where nothing is known about how things will be. People will feel out of control. And finally, focus on beginnings, where people start to think about what to create in the future. A pitfall for managers is skipping the first two steps and experiencing derailment because so much goes unacknowledged.”

“Not expecting people to be ‘business as usual’ right away is important.”

If employees are dispersed, online tools are helpful for staying in touch, but they are no substitute for initial human contact. Discussion groups and e-mail can keep everyone informed, but a phone call or personal visit will more strongly convey genuine concern and interest.

Given opportunities to discuss their concerns, impressions, and ideas, employees will find their own pace through the progression of stages Pool mentions, unfortunately not all with the same timing. It’s important for managers to recognize direct reports as individuals and to know that each person may react differently to stress. Although a group discussion immediately after an event can help employees feel solidarity and support, checking in with each individual in the coming weeks will be equally important. This can be as simple as saying, “It’s been pretty hectic around here. Are you doing okay?” Some managers set up call lists so that each employee gets contact from senior leaders in the weeks after a crisis. There’s a sense of comfort in seeing your leader go the extra mile to maintain extraordinary contact.

As certain as death and taxes.

In 1986, author Steven Fink conducted a confidential survey of *Fortune 500* CEOs on the subject of crises. The survey results, reported in his book *Crisis Management*, indicated that 89% of the executives believed that “a crisis in business today is as inevitable as death and taxes.” The range of items that can precipitate a crisis are diverse: industrial accidents, environmental problems, product recalls, financial issues, hostile takeovers, and acts of terrorism. (In this context, acts of terrorism were likely considered directed at a specific organization, rather than at a nation.)

Of the crises reported by the respondents

- ▶ 55% interfered with normal business operations
- ▶ 52% damaged the company’s bottom line

What Should You Watch For?

Common Physical or Psychological Reactions to Crisis

- ▶ Hyperactivity
- ▶ Easily startled
- ▶ Withdrawal or isolation
- ▶ Inability to concentrate
- ▶ Underactivity
- ▶ Oversensitivity
- ▶ Anger
- ▶ Preoccupation
- ▶ Memory problems
- ▶ Easily frustrated
- ▶ Nightmares
- ▶ Appetite disruptions
- ▶ Exhaustion
- ▶ Expressing the feeling that emotions are wimpy

Source: White, Laurie; Liebowitz, Jessica; Webb, Harold; Philips, Sheila. "Critical Incidents Stress Debriefing", Adams State College, Alamosa, Colorado, 1998. Photocopy.

In many cases, the ability to share thoughts with trusted colleagues is helpful, and time is also an ally. However, in cases where symptoms continue over weeks or months, referral to an employee assistance program or professional counselor is recommended.

2. Be aware, interested, and supportive.

Take note of the consistency of behavior (or lack of) in those around you. Some signals of distress can be noticed with even casual observance, while others are subtle and hidden in distracting behaviors, communications, and issues. Some stress reactions can be delayed. Symptoms and signals of stress during troubled times indicate a *state of distress*, not necessarily weakness or incompetence.

Barbara Singer, director of Lore's Executive Coaching Practice notes, "Crisis brings out both the best in people and the worst in people. Everyone has an inferior function that they would prefer not to operate in, but when stress levels become exceptionally high, we fall into the grip of our shadow side. It's important for managers to remember not to make permanent judgments about a person's capability during unsettled circumstances."

As a part of your communications with staff, make sure that everyone is aware of corporate resources that can support them. This might be an employee assistance program, an outplacement office, or even discussion groups set up to assist with sharing of ideas and emotions.

And in some cases, continued group communications may be preferred and entirely appropriate. The group will be the barometer of this. Colette Ruoff, a professional psychologist and Lore consultant, encourages managers of groups who crave further support to "facilitate daily morning or lunchtime meetings that allow employees to talk about their experiences over time. These are not meant to be group counseling sessions; rather they are a place for people

to share thoughts, feelings, and ideas relating to the incident. In running these meetings, managers need to encourage equal participation, maintain a high-quality listening environment, and work through any contentious issues that may erupt. Having a daily place to vent and bring their issues and concerns is essential to shift their sense of powerlessness in the face of these attacks to a sense of power over their own lives. If run properly, these

The most important point to focus on is how the current behavior has substantially changed from the person's previous behavior.

gatherings will also strengthen the sense of community and commitment to the group and organization in general and give the manager an opportunity to work through workplace issues as they arise."

3. Be accessible.

"Managers usually go into hiding during a change, sometimes because of their own fears and reactions, but often because they feel they are expected to know the answers," says Lore consultant Tom Gosselin. "This gives new dimensions to the term 'executive retreat.' People will perceive the manager as knowing something but reluctant to say, fueling the uncertainty. Advice: Be *present*. Working through it with the staff establishes a common bond that will withstand a great deal. Woody Allen has a great line, 'Eighty percent of life is showing up.' Being there sends a signal."

And understand that accessibility doesn't mean that you have to have all the answers. You're going through the same crisis as your direct reports. It is critical that you acknowledge your own feelings and concerns. You're not made of stone. You can be a calm conduit of information and genuine concern, *when it is appropriate*. In times of trouble more than ever, you can lead the state of mind in your work environment, not with artificial gaiety or false bravado, but with a calming sense that "we will face this together."

The most challenging position during unsettled times is finding yourself managing morale in multiple directions. The manager who must bolster the climate of senior leaders *and* support direct reports is often stretched too thin. Advice: Expend energy managing your own morale and the morale of your direct reports. You will be measured by how *your* team weathers the storm.

4. Answer the "me" question.

Donna Deeds stresses that, "Employees need to know the answer to the 'me' question. They have to know, 'how will this crisis affect my job and me?' The sooner this communication can occur the better." This may require a different spin on some conventional corporate communications. Instead of merely reporting financial data, employees will want to know what those numbers mean for them.

As much as some employees want to know the personal impact, they are afraid to ask. A good ending question to ask when reporting new information is,

"Does anyone have questions about how this impacts you? I'll be happy to discuss it online or off." This creates an invited space or climate of permission to discuss the impact of events in a very personal, private way. Some individuals may feel guilty asking the "me" question because they feel that their self-concern is inappropriate. Self-concern is natural and should be acknowledged as such.

Self-concern is natural; taking advantage of a situation is not. Demands for extraordinary personal benefits in exchange for appropriate crisis reaction (you might call it personal price gouging) are not appropriate—and that message should be communicated clearly. "I'm surprised that we are having this conversation under these circumstances," is a response that I like. Although their participation in crisis response may be necessary in the short term, these are not individuals that you want on your team long term. You need to communicate clearly that such behavior is not acceptable and ultimately will not be rewarded.

5. Provide a positive avenue for action and energy.

Some members of your team will find comfort in action. It's only natural to want to help. Post-crisis solidarity can often be enhanced by enabling action on a common cause such as fund-raising for disaster relief or volunteer work. Lore's Steve Isenberg notes the "positive direction that this puts on activity. It helps alleviate the feeling of loss of control and redirects negative energy in a more productive forum." Post-crisis solidarity can often continue and transforms these endeavors into long-term contributions that groups

choose to make together. Individuals should be invited to act in these activities on a voluntary basis, and it should be stressed that there is no pressure to participate.

6. Inspire new outcomes and maintain solidarity.

In troubled times, new leaders emerge. Now is a time to watch for leadership behaviors in others; reward the contribution; and help direct those individuals to career paths, mentoring, and support that will most benefit them and the organization. Overtly recognizing individuals with new leadership positions underscores positive behavior that others in the organization can emulate.

Beyond prompting emerging leadership, events that shake the status quo often promote extraordinary creativity and innovative responses from everyone. Colette Ruoff notes, "As workers integrate the emotional impact of a trauma, their priorities are likely to change, sometimes dramatically. As this occurs, managers have an exciting opportunity to inspire their workers to bring forth more of what is important to them through new initiatives, creating innovative products and services and taking on leadership opportunities." This creativity is a valuable outlet for individuals and helpful to the organization.

This final point is, I believe, most important. Teams and intact work groups frequently achieve extraordinary solidarity in troubled times. Challenge the group to find ways to continue to support each other beyond the return to business as usual. The results can transform the way the team works and what it accomplishes.

You don't need formal training for this.

The bottom line is that a manager's response should be quick, consistent, genuine, and ongoing. You don't need formal education to teach you how to genuinely care about your colleagues. And an expression of caring is what they need *most* in troubled times.

At Lore International Institute, we are very interested in innovative approaches to helping teams and direct reports cope with challenges. If you have a story of inspired response, please share it with us at impact@lorenet.com.