What makes crisis leadership different?

Leadership - in any setting, whether in the board room, operating theatre or the cockpit of an airliner - is a subject of constant interest that is widely researched. It is generally recognised that crisis leadership can be extremely demanding, and that a crisis can ruin the reputation of leaders who were otherwise regarded as successful. Crises can, conversely, make the reputation of leaders who demonstrate their mettle 'under fire'.

ISO 22361 rightly focusses on the issue of crisis leadership, devoting almost 10% of its pages to it. If we include crisis decision making, a prime focus of crisis leadership, it spends six pages - almost 20% of the document - on this one issue. Here we discuss the differences between crisis leadership and 'everyday leadership', and how leaders can best prepare for their potential 'moment in the spotlight'. The paper draws both on research and on Terra Firma's accumulated years of practical experience advising teams and their leaders during incidents and crises.

What is leadership?
Let's start by defining leadership. ISO 22361 lists core leadership skills and attributes, and the roles and responsibilities of a crisis leader, but doesn't define leadership. The Oxford English dictionary defines it as 'the action of leading a group of people or an organisation' - an accurate but rather functional definition. McKinsey & Company attempts to define leadership more fully: 'Leadership is a set of behaviours that, in a given context, align an organization, foster execution and ensure organizational renewal. They are enabled by relevant skills and mindsets.'[1] The professional head of the British Army, in his foreword to the Army's Leadership Doctrine[2], defined leadership more laterally: '… because it's a personal thing, essentially, it's about you and your behaviours and at its most simple it's about translating your intent into action through other people'.

It may be more useful, instead, to define what makes an effective crisis leader. Tim Johnson, in his excellent book 'Crisis Leadership'[3] asserts that 'the only sensible way to judge success is whether or not the leader keeps his or her job'. This is attractive but does not take into account the times when a leader keeps his or her job despite evident weaknesses or failures - due, for instance, to an ability to deflect blame onto others or take credit where it wasn't actually due. Terra Firma's exposure to numerous crisis leaders and management teams leads us to define effective crisis leadership as 'setting direction, motivating people and using all available resources (information, people, assets, technology, networks and sources of support and advice) to the greatest effect to resolve the situation in a timely manner and in accordance with the values of the organisation'.

What are the qualities needed in a crisis leader?
There are as many lists of leadership qualities as there are leadership gurus to expound them. Underlying them all, however, is the idea that leadership qualities can be categorised into competencies (skills or abilities) and behaviours. It's generally accepted that leaders need to be competent in areas such as professional knowledge, interpersonal skills, situation assessment, generation of options, delegation, decision making, stakeholder management and stress

---

[1] McKinsey February 2019, https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-organization-blog/why-defining-leadership-is-imperative
[2] https://www.army.mod.uk/media/14177/21-07-267-army-leadership-doctrine-web.pdf - an excellent review of army leadership. This quotation is from the foreword by General Mark Carleton-Smith KCB CBE ADC Gen.
[3] Tim Johnson, "Crisis Leadership: how to lead in times of crisis, threat and uncertainty", Bloomsbury 2018.

management. And that leaders also need less tangible behaviours such as integrity, courage, calmness, confidence, empathy, determination, robustness and resilience. This seems common sense and is backed by voluminous research.[4]

It is clear that crisis leaders will need to draw on the qualities listed above. But there's a difference between demonstrating these qualities in the relative calm of everyday work life and in doing so during the maelstrom of a crisis.

It has long been recognised that performance is context specific. Terra Firma's Crisis Manual explains: 'The medical profession has recognised that high performance in one's area of skill is often dependent on the environment where the skill is normally practised. An example is an anaesthetist performing his or her usual airway skills outside the usual environment, i.e., the operating theatre. Observations show that, despite the anaesthetist being technically skilled in performing airway management in the operating theatre, there is a noticeable degradation of performance when applying those same skills outside it. In the crisis management context, managers who are usually highly skilled in their normal area of operations are likely to experience performance degradation when thrown into another context, i.e., the crisis management team (CMT). This is particularly evident when additional stressors are added'[5].

So, people will perform differently in different contexts - a manager who is confident and high-performing in his or her usual context may find it much more difficult to perform in another. Mastering a crisis doesn't need different leadership qualities but, because the context is different, it often needs these qualities to be deployed in a different way and for different approaches to be taken. As Tim Johnson argues[6], crisis leadership is '… the ability of leaders not to show *different* leadership competencies but rather to display the *same* competencies under the extreme pressures that characterise a crisis…'.

Before exploring these 'extreme pressures' that makes crises different, let us clarify some related points.

- Firstly, there is a difference between management and leadership. In a nutshell, leadership is about inspiring or influencing people, whereas management is about controlling processes. Some senior managers or CEOs have reached where they are because they are effective managers and they may not have had the opportunity, or the training, or may simply lack the ability to be a good leader.

- Secondly, leadership can be learnt and trained, but it usually takes time and application (and some ability on the part of the student) to do this. As noted above, a change of context can render a leader who is effective in their normal context uncertain and ineffective in a crisis. It is rare, although not unknown, that someone who is an indifferent leader in routine times suddenly becomes an effective crisis leader. Equally, leadership does not depend on rank or seniority. Effective and imaginative training, or a crisis itself, can sometimes reveal the leadership talents of managers who have never previously shone, or been given the opportunity to demonstrate them.

So, what are the challenges peculiar to crisis leadership?
It's well known that it is difficult to lead and make decisions in a crisis. Stress creates physical changes in the body which materially affect cognitive processes. Over time, the combination of stress and fatigue further diminish decision makers' ability to function. ISO 22361 covers the human and cultural factors that influence crisis management, the effect of high levels of uncertainty and poor or

---

[4] Among the many articles on leadership, one of the most interesting and enlightening is 'Crisis leadership: Using Military Lessons, Organizational Experiences, and the Power of Influence to Lessen the Impact of Chaos on the People You Lead' written by Gene Klann for the Center for Creative Leadership, CCL Press 2003.
[5] Terra Firma Crisis Management Manual, Terra Firma Risk Management LLP, 2016, p. 36.
[6] Tim Johnson, op. cit., p. 15

contradictory information, the dilemmas and the tendency to avoid decisions when stakes are high and options are sub-optimal.

It is not so well known that personality traits are reinforced under stress. Research indicates that a number of personality types, including compulsive and narcissistic, are frequently found in the ranks of leaders[7]. In normal times these can be productive attributes but, when exacerbated due to stress, they become negative. Take compulsive personality types, for example. In normal times such individuals have good attention to detail, rational processing and organisational ability, and approach decision making based on logical reasoning. They attempt to consider all aspects of a problem before reaching a conclusion. In a crisis, however, '…compulsive personality traits can interfere with effective decision-making, causing preoccupation with detail, an inability to see the 'big picture', and indecisiveness. The fear of making mistakes drives a never-ending search for more information to arrive at the correct decision; this leads to procrastination or 'analysis-paralysis'. In group situations, compulsive personalities can place too great an emphasis on interpersonal hierarchy, resulting in blind submission to the ideas of those perceived as superiors. Furthermore, such personalities, whilst outwardly appearing to be receptive to advice from experts, will often ignore it once a decision has been made'[8].

Of course, the majority of senior leaders may be well-balanced personalities. But it's an additional explanation for what Terra Firma's crisis management advisers have seen over the years - the behaviour of leaders often changes, for good and for bad, when under stress. Knowledge of the existence of such personality types (and their potential impact on decision making under stress) is important. Training and feedback can help identify the influence of all personality types on the CMT's decision making, and, if necessary, modify or channel their impact. The reassignment of roles for unsuitable individuals or their removal from the CMT may be appropriate in some circumstances.

What's different about *crisis* leadership?
Let's start with the tangibles - the abilities, techniques and approaches best suited to leadership in a crisis:

Managing stress. Leadership perhaps implies some stress even at the best of times but, as we've discussed, crises bring a different level. Crisis leaders needs to be able to look after themselves, ensuring enough rest and, crucially, space and time to maintain perspective and 'think outside the box'. The British Army has always been very clear on this issue - young officers and other junior leaders are left in no doubt that 'rest is a duty, not an option or a luxury'[9].

Managing task, team and individuals. A crisis leader, of course, also has to acknowledge the stress on others, and needs constantly to be watching over the team and ensuring that groups and individuals are supported appropriately and that work is delegated judiciously. The tempo of crisis management meetings should be adjusted so that individuals and sub-teams have time not only to achieve their tasks but also to take care of themselves and to process what is occurring to them. Leaders will be constantly juggling the three areas of leadership - the task, the team and the individuals[10]. Due to the friction of crisis (like Clausewitz's friction of war - 'the concept that differentiates actual war from war on paper,'[11]), a leader has to work doubly hard in a crisis to get the best out of the team when they're under stress.

---

[7] For example, read Post, J., The Impact of Crisis-Induced Stress on Policy Makers, in Avoiding Inadvertent War, edited by George, A., Westview Press, Colorado, 1993, and Hale, J., A Layered Communication Architecture for the Support of Crisis Response, Journal of Management Information Systems, Vol. 14, No. 1., 1997
[8] Terra Firma, op. cit., pp.36-37
[9] Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst officer training, late 1980s.
[10] For more on this, read John Adair's "The action-centred leader'. Gower Publishing, 1979.
[11] *On War*, **Karl von Clausewitz, translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, 1976/84.**

<u>Accept new realities and tolerate ambiguity</u>. ISO 22361 rightly draws attention to the need for a crisis leader sometimes to accept a new reality, and to do so rapidly while besieged by uncertainty and confusion (this was seen particularly at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic). This is allied to the need for crisis leaders to be able to tolerate ambiguity, and to encourage crisis management teams to do the same, and to be able to develop and implement multiple plans simultaneously, rather than wait for certainty. There is increasing interest in and research into acutely complex or chaotic crises, where uncertainty and inconsistency abound. This has led to the concept of 'sense-making'[12]. Similarly, Harvard Business Review provided a very useful and interesting analysis of how leadership and the skills and approaches that need to be brought to bear change as challenges become more complex.[13]

<u>Timely decisions</u>. This links with the crisis leader's need to be comfortable with making timely decisions even when there is a lack of information. US politician and general Colin Powell famously had a '40-70 rule' - in a crisis, he would take a decision when he thought he had between 40% and 70% of the information that he would ideally require. With less than 40% he had too little information, but if he waited for more than 70% of the information he would have waited for too long and lost his opportunity. Equally, crisis leaders must know when to delay a decision and to avoid the pitfalls of making decisions just to be seen to be doing something.

<u>Leadership styles</u>. Day to day leadership will often have time on its side; crisis leadership rarely does. The crisis leader will often have to demand quicker analysis and decision making. This can sometimes be achieved simply by slicker processes, quicker delegation and meetings that are more disciplined and 'snappier' than normal. It can also mean applying Powell's 40-70 rule more robustly. Leadership may be authoritative but should never degenerate into an authoritarian style that rides roughshod over views other than the leader's. Atul Gawande, in his excellent book 'The Checklist Manifesto'[14], made clear that crises or emergencies are too complex for one person to manage without making potentially catastrophic errors: in other words, a team approach is essential in a crisis. The mark of a crisis leader is to be able to use the team to its fullest extent in the time and space available.

<u>Strategy and vision</u>. A crisis leader, even while beset by uncertainty and confusion, and sometimes media, regulators, and other stakeholders hammering at the door, needs to be able to keep his or her eye very much on the big picture, and not to be sucked into the vortex of operational and tactical planning. Organisations, particularly big ones, tend to be siloed or compartmentalised, but the leader needs to ensure that the CMT is thinking strategically and holistically. There is a good argument for the CMT to be led, where possible, not by the CEO but by a trusted senior manager. This allows the CEO to 'fly the plane[15]' - ensuring the organisation keeps operating and maintaining stakeholder confidence. However, in crises of governance and reputation, the CEO will usually need to be in the CMT, being seen to take full ownership of all decisions - indeed, giving the process the full stamp of their authority. In such a situation, it's necessary to have a plan to maintain business continuity and give the CEO the resources both to keep 'flying the plane' and manage the crisis simultaneously.

In many crises, it's vital that the crisis leader provides vision not only to the CMT but also to the wider organisation. By this, we mean that the leader needs to convince the team to look beyond the immediate crisis and to show that they can lead the organisation to a better future - to help them 'see the other side of the hill'. In reputational crises particularly, the CEO may need to instil confidence in staff and stakeholders that the organisation will not only manage the crisis, but will learn from

---

[12] For example, read https://www.tobysinclair.com/post/how-sensemaking-helps-you-lead-in-complexity
[13] https://hbr.org/2007/11/a-leaders-framework-for-decision-making?registration=success by David J Snowden and Mary E Boone.
[14] The Checklist Manifesto: How To Get Things Right by Atul Gawande, December 22, 2009 by Metropolitan Books
[15] 'Flying the plane' is an aviation crisis management axiom. In the 1970s and 80s it was noticed that a number of air crashes occurred because chief pilots were drawn into helping cockpit crews solve complex technical issues in-flight, leaving no-one effectively flying the plane. It became mandatory to ensure that, while some cockpit crew devoted themselves to resolving technical issues, one officer remained dedicated to keeping the aircraft on a safe flight path.

mistakes and ultimately be a better place to work, or a better partner, supplier or provider, than it was before the crisis. In governance or reputational crises, where regaining confidence is the key to success, a credible vision narrative can be a vital prerequisite to galvanise demoralised staff into supporting the CEO and dealing with the crisis.

The intangibles. Given that leadership is so much about motivation and influencing, these 'soft qualities' are key to success in crisis leadership.

ISO 22361 rightly notes emotional intelligence as an important quality in a crisis leader. Indeed, it might be regarded as essential. Daniel Goleman writes 'Research … clearly shows that emotional intelligence is the *sine qua non* of leadership. Without it, a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive, analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he still won't make a great leader.'[16] Leaders that intimidate and overrule (or simply don't hear) their colleagues are unlikely to oversee success in complex and uncertain situations. While some people will be naturally emotionally intelligent, it can be learned, developed, and enhanced.

It's essential that, from the first moment, a crisis leader projects **calmness**: this is partly a matter of preventing panic in the organisation; it's also the leader providing him or herself the time and space to process the information and allow a considered response. A leader needs to resist the urge to make immediate decisions unless they are absolutely essential. A good example of this was President J F Kennedy's calm and measured leadership during the Cuban missile crisis when, in the face of his military chiefs' immediate and repeated advice to invade Cuba, he took the time to deliberate and develop a strategic response that arguably saved the world from a nuclear war.

Despite the stress and the confusion, a leader should project a **proper sense of self-confidence**, giving the impression that they have no doubts that the team will find the right solutions and will ultimately be successful. It's important that this doesn't translate into arrogance - **humility** is a cardinal quality of a leader and is particularly essential in a crisis. Staff will not follow bluster or false optimism - at least, not for long! Showing uncertainty is not a failing in a leader. For example, many of us will have seen uncertainty in leaders in the initial stages of the coronavirus pandemic - it was the only honest sentiment, given the circumstances. Effective leaders admitted to uncertainty but inspired their teams to continue to respond flexibly and build plans that could be adapted as the situation became incrementally clearer.

A CEO might be humble ("we got this very wrong; we will do all we can to find out what happened, sanction those responsible and do all we can to make things better") and admit to uncertainty and an inability to control external events (in the face of a pandemic or an earthquake, for instance), but this shouldn't be confused with a lack of resolve. One of the hallmarks of successful crisis leaders is the combination of humility and **unshakeable resolve** ("we will see this through and we will succeed"). This resolve should be based on **principle and moral courage** - ensuring that the organisation does what is right (rather than what it can get away with or only what it is legally obliged to do), and is not intimidated by interested parties, external or internal, into taking paths that might at first appear easy and popular but are, objectively, unfair or unprincipled.[17]

Summary
Leadership is very different to management and depends very much on the ability to motivate and inspire. The fundamentals of leadership remain the same whatever the circumstances, but the

---

[16] https://hbr.org/2004/01/what-makes-a-leader Originally published in June 1996.
[17] Jim Hawkins led some fascinating research into leadership in US business. He defined the best leaders, 'Level 5 leaders' as he called them, as leaders 'who elevate companies from mediocrity to sustained excellence'. He felt the evidence showed that this blend of humility and resolve was cardinal in their success. In an article for the Harvard Business Review in 2001, he defined a Level 5 leader as 'an executive in whom extreme personal humility blends paradoxically with intense professional will' and gave examples of such people in US business. https://hbr.org/2001/01/level-5-leadership-the-triumph-of-humility-and-fierce-resolve-2

particular challenges of crisis leadership mean that the way in which leadership attributes are deployed can be very different. There are tangible skills and intangible qualities that are particularly needed in crisis.

Not everyone will be a natural leader but, in most cases, leadership can be learnt and taught - indeed, powers of leadership can be developed and honed through mentoring and training. All team members should be aware of the impact of personality traits and organisational culture on decision making and should be able to identify when these factors are affecting performance. We have seen over the years that it is rarely sub-optimal plans or processes that derail crisis response for long, as ways to work around these problems are usually quickly found. In our experience, it is almost always people, and the way they interact, that have the greatest detrimental impact on crisis management.

Preparation should therefore focus on people as well as processes. ISO 22361:2022 separates training and exercising activities: individual and group training is aimed at improving individual capabilities to fulfil specific crisis management roles; and exercising is aimed at developing the CMT, its competence and ability to manage a broad range of crises and 'to ensure the plan and processes are fit for purpose'[18]. Both training and exercising should be progressive, realistic, and challenging in order to develop leaders and teams that can manage crises effectively, whatever their origin. The ISO standard makes clear that organisations should build capability not only by training and exercising but also by learning the lessons after crises[19], and we believe it is sensible to do so at each level (individual, team and organisation). We also consider individual mentoring, particularly for crisis leaders, to be a valuable learning and development activity.

This last point - that of preparing for any crisis, whatever its origin - is vital, particularly in the current era of change and disruption. Crisis management preparation and training often tends to be one-off, 'tick box' and focused on known threats (e.g., kidnap, cyber, natural disaster). This encourages a playbook approach and fails to prepare organisations for unexpected threats, or crises of unexpected severity or dimension. We recommend that organisations explicitly focus on preparing their CMTs to deal with the unexpected. This demands creative and imaginative use of training scenarios, with important senior leaders removed 'from the action' on pretexts such as illness, conflict of interest or recusal. In many cases it should also include preparation for governance or reputational crises, where top managers and board members are not just decision makers but are also actively 'in the line of fire', i.e., implicated or involved in the crisis itself. Such training should ideally be iterative, frequent, and unexpected, and should include internal managers beyond the usual CMT as well as external advisers (insurance, medical, legal, security, etc.). 'Train hard, fight easy' is a well-known maxim, and holds true for organisations that want to be confident they can respond to disruption and demonstrate true operational resilience.

---

[18] BS EN ISO 22361:2022, Security and resilience - Crisis management – Guidelines, Section 9: Training, validation and learning from crises, BSI Standards Ltd, 2022, p30, clause 9.1.
[19] BS EN ISO 22361:2022, page 30, clause 9.1.: 'The objective of building crisis management capabilities through continual improvement can also be supported by the organisation's training and exercising activities and learning the lessons identified from crises'