Leadership for the Modern Organization

Peter D. Harms
Daniel G. Bachrach
Robert T. Hogan

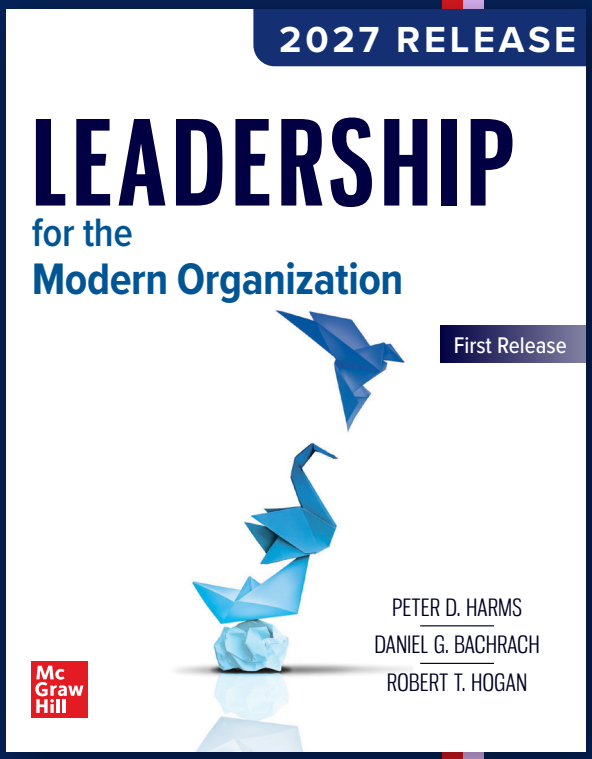


Table of Contents

Table of Contents 2
Chapter 12 5

Table of Contents

Copyright
About the Author Team
Preface
What Makes This Book Different
How This Book Is Organized
Features Designed to Support Learning
Acknowledgments

Chapter 1: What is Leadership and Why Does it Matter?
- Introduction
- The Importance of Good Leaders and Leadership
- Defining Leadership
- Leaders vs. Managers
- Leadership Across Levels of the Organization
- Developing Competencies and Thinking Like a Leader
- In the Not-Too-Distant Future…
- Discussion Questions
- Competency Check: Leader Efficacy
- Key Terms
- Case Study
  - Karen Sammon and the Stretch to the C-Suite
  - Case Discussion Questions
- References

Chapter 2: Personality: Understanding the Nature of Leaders and Followers
- Introduction
- The Great Man Theory of Leadership
- The History of Leadership and Personality
- What is Personality and Why does it Matter?
  - Personality and Leadership
- The Big Five and Modern Perspectives on Personality
  - Corporate Leaders and Their Personalities
  - Derailers: The Dark Side of Personality
  - Motives
  - Other Personality Factors: Abilities and Perceptions
- In the Not-Too-Distant Future…
- Discussion Questions
- Competency Check: Psychological Mindedness and Decision-Making
- Competency Check: Decision-Making
- Key Terms
- Case Study
  - Beyond Petroleum, Beneath the Surface: Personality, Stress, and Leadership at BP
  - Case Discussion Questions
- References

Chapter 3: Making Decisions, Delegating, and Directing Activities
- Introduction
- What Kinds of Decisions Do Leaders Make?
  - Planning, Budgeting, and Forecasting
  - Organizing and Staffing
  - Setting Directions and Vision
- Effective Decision-Making
- Determining Who Makes the Decision
- Instrumental Leadership
- Time Management
- How to Delegate
- Situational Leadership
- In the Not-Too-Distant Future…
- Discussion Questions
- Competency Check: Planning and
- Execution
- Key Terms
- Case Study
  - I'm Putting a Team Together…
  - Case Discussion Questions
- References

Chapter 4: Evaluating Performance and Providing Feedback
Introduction
- Taylorism and Scientific Management: The Foundation of Modern Management
- Performance Models
  - What Performance Is
  - The Performance of Leaders
- The Outsized Effects of Star Performers and Toxic Employees in the Workplace
- Performance Feedback Approaches
  - Types of Feedback
  - Delivering Feedback
- Changing Employees' Performance
  - OB Mod
  - Goal Setting
- Progressive Discipline
  - Terminations
- In the Not-Too-Distant Future…
- Discussion Questions
- Competency Check: Receiving Feedback
- Competency Check: Giving Feedback
- Competency Check: Resource Management
- Key Terms
- Case Study
  - The Bluebird Massacre: Elon Musk and the Twitter Terminations
  - Case Discussion Questions
- References

Chapter 5: Supporting Followers
- Introduction
- Behavioral Models of Leadership
  - Results of Initiating Structure and Showing Consideration
- Contingency Models of Leadership
  - Results of Fielder's Contingency Model
- Attachment Theory and Leadership
- Leader–Member Exchange
- Trust in Leadership
- Emotional Intelligence and Leadership
- Work–Life Balance
- In the Not-Too-Distant Future…
- Discussion Questions
- Competency Check: Interpersonal Skills and Relationships
- Competency Check: Work–Life Balance
- Key Terms
- Case Study
  - Zero Injuries, Zero Excuses: How Paul O'Neill Rebuilt Trust at Alcoa
- Case Discussion Questions
- References

Chapter 6: Developing Followers and Leaders
- Introduction
- Training
- Mentoring Programs
- Developing Leaders
  - Origins of Leadership
- Personality Change and Leadership Experiences
  - Intentional Leadership Development
- Developmental Assessment Centers

- Executive Coaching
  - Leader Trainability
  - Circumstances for Leadership Interventions
- Aging, Retirement, and Succession Planning
- In the Not-Too-Distant Future…
- Discussion Questions
- Competency Check: Developing Others
- Competency Check: Self-Development
- Competency Check: Learning from Someone Else's Leadership Journey
- Key Terms
- Case Study
  - From Crisis To Continuity: Developing Ursula Burns As Xerox's Next Leader
  - Case Discussion Questions
- References

Chapter 7: Persuading and Communicating
- Introduction
- Persuasion
- Power
  - Bases of Power
- Influence Tactics
  - Followership
- Multi-Channel Communication
- Listening
- Communication Disorders
- Digital Leadership

In the Not-Too-Distant Future…
- Discussion Questions
  Competency Check: Influencing Others
- Competency Check: Presentation Skills
  Key Terms
- Case Study
  - Pericles' Funeral Oration—Is a Dream Worth Fighting For?
  - Case Discussion Questions
- References

Chapter 8: Leading Teams and Understanding Social Networks
- Introduction
- Team Leadership Functions
  - Leading digital teams
  - Leadership, personality, and team performance
- Different Structures of Team Leadership
  - Shared Leadership
- Social Networks in Teams
  - Leading within Social Networks
- Political Skill and Leadership
- Conflict Management in Teams
- Integrating Team Members with Different Skill Sets
  - Working with Rivals/Enemies
  - Managing Team Performance
  - Top Management Teams
- In the Not-Too-Distant Future…
- Discussion Questions
- Competency Check: Building and Maintaining Teams
  - Exercise 1: Organize a Volunteer Project
  - Exercise 2: Host a Game Night or Tournament
- Key Terms
- Case Study
  - The Johnsonville Way: Building a Company that Doesn't Wait for Permission
  - Case Discussion Questions
- References

Chapter 9: Envisioning Change
- Introduction
- Charisma
  - Origins
  - What Does It Mean to Be Charismatic?
  - Rhetorical Techniques
  - How Followers Respond
  - Identity-based Visions: Who Are We Becoming?
  - What Impact Does Charismatic Leadership Have?
  - The Dark Side of Charisma
- Sensemaking and Sensegiving
- Transformational Leadership
  - The Full Range Leadership Theory
- Callbacks to a Glorious Past
- In the Not-Too-Distant Future…
- Discussion Questions
- Competency Check: Providing a Vision

Key Terms
- Case Study
  - Envisioning National Renewal and Delivering Transformation
  - Case Discussion Questions
- References

Chapter 10: Encouraging Innovation and Creativity
- Introduction
- Defining Creativity and Innovation
  - Creativity
  - Innovation
- What Kind of Leaders Inspire Creativity?
- Effective Leadership Behaviors Associated with Encouraging Employee Creativity.
  - Leader Behaviors That Provide Support
- Leader Behaviors as Drivers of Creativity
- Building A Learning Organization
- How Leaders Can Foster A Learning Organization
  - Model Behavior for Employees
  - Provide Meaning to Work
- Initiating and Sustaining Organizational Change
  - External and Internal Triggers
  - Planning and Implementing Organizational Change
  - The Role of Senior Leaders in Implementing Change
  - Getting Buy-in Across the Organization
- Resistance to Change
- Knowing When to Quit
- In the Not-Too-Distant Future…
- Discussion Questions
- Competency Check: Fostering Creativity
- Key Terms
- Case Study
  - Build, Test, Rebuild: How LEGO Engineered a Culture of Innovation
  - Case Discussion Questions:
- References

Chapter 11: Fostering Inclusivity and Leveraging Diversity
- Introduction
- Inclusive Leadership
  - Overcoming Bias and Stereotypes in the Workplace
  - Senior Leaders as the Catalysts of Inclusive Workplaces
- Gender and Leadership
  - Understanding Invisible Barriers to Women's Advancement
  - Leadership Emergence, Leadership Effectiveness, and Leadership Styles

- The Queen Bee Phenomenon
- Cross-Cultural and International Implications for Leadership
  - Hofstede's Cultural-Dimensions Framework
  - Project GLOBE
  - Shifts in Culture
  - Within-Country Regional Differences in Culture
- Preparing Executives for Overseas Assignments
- In the Not-Too-Distant Future…
- Discussion Questions
- Competency Check: Aligning Personality with Organizational Culture
- Competency Check: Perspective-Taking
- Competency Check: Cultural Intelligence
- Key Terms
- Case: Alien Intruder: Outsmarting Security with Stereotypes and Social Engineering
  - Case Discussion Questions
- References

Chapter 12: Dealing with Crisis
- Introduction
- The Nature of Crisis
- The 5Ps Model: Helping Leaders be Ready for Crisis Events
- Swot Analysis
- Stress and Leadership
  - Cognitive Resource Theory
  - Leadership and Health
  - Managing the Health of Others
- Leadership in Extremis
- Healing After The Crisis
- Becoming The Crisis: Insurgency Leadership
- In the Not-Too-Distant Future…
- Discussion Questions
- Competency Check: Stress Tolerance
- Competency Check: Safety Awareness
- Competency Check: Creating a Contingency Plan
- Key Terms
- Case Study
  - I Will Always Love You: Dolly Parton, Crisis, Community, and Compassion
  - Case Discussion Questions
- References

Chapter 13: Leader Derailment and Ethics
- Introduction
- Destructive Leadership
  - Abusive Supervision
  - Absentee Leadership
  - Stingy Leadership
  - Autocratic Leadership
  - Narcissistic Leadership
  - Personality Derailers and Types of Destructive Leadership
  - Shaw's Taxonomy of Toxic Leadership
- The Toxic Triangle
  - Fatal Attractions
- Moral Models of Leadership
  - Authentic Leadership
  - Ethical Leadership
- Moral Foundations of Leadership
  - What MFT Means for Leaders
- "Necessary Evil": Do the Ends Justify the Means?
- In the Not-Too-Distant Future…
- Discussion Questions
- Competency Check: Versatility
- Key Terms
- Case Study
  - Virtual Avatars, Real Consequences: How VTuber Agencies Broke the "Talent-First" Promise
  - Case Discussion Questions
- References

Chapter 14: Strategic Leadership and Representing the Organization
- Introduction
- Strategic Leadership
- The CEO Position
  - The Personality of CEOs
- Leading Family Firms
- Entrepreneurial versus Small Business Orientation
- Servant Leadership
- Leading Nonprofit Organizations
- Green Leadership
- In the Not-Too-Distant Future…
- Discussion Questions
- Competency Check: Long-Term Perspective Taking
- Competency Check: Civic Mindset/Corporate Social Responsibility
- Key Terms
- Case Study
  - When Mission Meets Money: A Crisis of Conscience at OpenAI
  - Case Discussion Questions
- References

CHAPTER 12
Dealing with Crisis

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

LO 12-1 Identify the nature of crisis.
LO 12-2 Explain the 5P Model and its impact on crisis preparedness.
LO 12-3 Discuss how SWOT analysis can assist leaders in preparing for possible crises.
LO 12-4 Identify the relationship between stress and leadership.
LO 12-5 Explain the propositions of cognitive resource theory.
LO 12-6 Describe the nature of insurgency leadership.

INTRODUCTION



TEPCO/AFLO Sports/Newscom

Imagine yourself as a plant supervisor for an energy production company. You're going over your daily reports and answering emails when suddenly the earth shudders beneath your feet, knocking you off your chair and sending office furniture tumbling around you. The plant alarms begin blaring, piercing the calm. Your workplace, normally orderly and quiet, is thrown into chaos and confusion. Stunned colleagues scramble back to their desks and computers to see what's happened. Everyone knows what they should be doing. The protocol is clear. Your team regularly practices tremor drills. While infrequent, earthquakes are common to the region. Although not typically as powerful as this tremor, your plant was designed to withstand even the strongest quakes. But as your subordinates try to get themselves reorganized, one of them calls out to you in alarm. The earthquake was only the beginning. Outside of the facility, down by the shoreline, the ocean is quickly draining away. And although you can't see it yet, in less than an hour your plant will be hit with a 45-foot wave—a tsunami. The tsunami will wreak havoc on the entire facility. It will kill workers. It will disable all of the safety measures that had been in place to prevent a meltdown. Everyone in the room looks to you for direction. What do you do?

This was the actual experience of Masao Yoshida, a nuclear engineer working at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant on March 11, 2011. The tsunami hit Fukushima, along with much of northern Japan's coastline, inflicting devastation for hundreds of miles. The giant wave killed almost 20,000 people, wiped out entire cities, and brought the plant's nuclear reactors to the brink of a meltdown or even a more deadly

fission chain reaction. Yoshida showed exemplary heroism that day. Throughout the unfolding disaster he repeatedly ignored the orders of uninformed and hysterical politicians and senior company executives who were more worried about preserving their investments and infrastructure than preventing a global calamity and the extreme risk to the health and well-being of his team.[1]

For Yoshida, the hardest part of being a leader during the Fukushima disaster wasn't keeping a clear head and knowing what to do. He had trained his whole life for that. It was the realization that he would need to ask his friends and colleagues to volunteer to repeatedly expose themselves to potentially lethal levels of radiation. In the hours and days that followed, they reentered the shattered plant to reconnect the water supplies that were necessary to cool the reactors, making a last-ditch effort to prevent a worst-case scenario that would have wiped out the plant, their team, the surrounding community, and rendered much of Japan unlivable for hundreds of years. Their bravery and sacrifice are recounted in the movie *Fukushima 50,*[2] which offers a compelling illustration of the importance of leadership in times of crisis.

THE NATURE OF CRISIS (LO 12-1)

Most people tend to associate "crisis" with dramatic, relatively rare phenomena, such as hurricanes, pandemics, earthquakes, floods, fires, terrorist attacks, data breaches, or even a catastrophic asteroid strike. Indeed, many crises are discrete in nature: They flare up abruptly and unexpectedly, cause significant disruption and damage, and then (eventually) subside.[3] However, over the past decade, we have witnessed several crises which have demonstrated that not all calamities are short-lived. Wars, refugee migrations, and fallout from a changing climate evolve over months or even years. This means that organizations and their leaders must contend with complex, sustained pressures. Both discrete and protracted crises test leaders' capacity to adapt, communicate effectively, and preserve stakeholder trust.[4]

Although it may seem paradoxical to label crises as both "rare" and "common," their nature and triggers can vary widely, making them more frequent than many leaders realize. Crises can stem from accidents, which are unplanned and unintentional, or from scandals, which are usually associated with intentional, but unethical, behavior or policy breaches.[5] For organizations, a crisis may be product-centered, such as fallout associated with faulty manufacturing or a tainted supply chain, or people-centered, such as disruptions associated with workforce strikes or leadership misconduct. Crises also may erupt at the individual level (e.g., a single executive caught embezzling or found guilty of sexual misconduct) or at the organization level (e.g., systemic failures in governance or corporate culture). All of these forms of crisis are alarmingly common. They can also emerge without a moment's notice or develop gradually, underscoring why preparedness and vigilance are crucial.

Among the reasons crises are so pervasive is that they can be triggered by seemingly small lapses, such as neglecting routine safety procedures, a single coding flaw in a piece of software, or a solitary ethical violation. But when these lapses occur in the context of volatile external conditions (e.g., economic recessions, natural disasters, social unrest), the resulting crisis can escalate to the point where organizations are forced to fundamentally reevaluate procedures, communication strategies, core values, and even viability as a company. This reality underscores the dual reality of crisis: Even if a specific trigger is rare (e.g., a once-in-a-century pandemic), the potential for organizations to experience unexpected, potentially fatal shocks remains high.

Crises also are highly consequential. They can disrupt revenue streams, destroy reputations, impact organizational culture, and affect employee well-being.[6] A single scandal can permanently damage a beloved brand and undermine trust among employees and customers alike. Crises can also lead to company failure. Because of this, adopting a crisis mindset of readiness and preparedness, whether discrete or prolonged, can help leaders avoid complacency, refine early detection strategies, and mobilize robust responses.

Please complete the CRISIS LEADERSHIP EFFICACY SELF-ASSESSMENT if your instructor has assigned it in Connect.

THE 5Ps MODEL: HELPING LEADERS BE READY FOR CRISIS EVENTS (LO 12-2)

Among leaders' most important functions is to facilitate effective group decision making in situations where there isn't time to discuss, vote, or arrive at consensus. Unfolding crises are exactly the circumstances where we rely on leaders the most.[7,8] Crises demand adaptability and clarity of purpose. Although organizations prioritize routine operations when things are stable, the eruption of crises can disrupt normal operating assumptions and processes. This can put organizations at risk for reputational damage, financial losses, or even collapse.[9] Leaders must respond swiftly and strategically, often without the luxury of complete information.

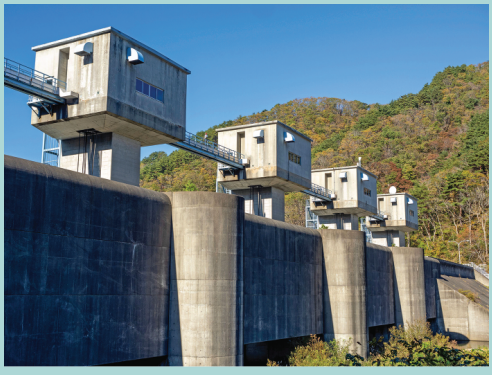
AI in the Workplace: Forecasting Disasters

AI can be an indispensable tool for leaders seeking to anticipate and mitigate the impact of natural and human-made disasters. AI can integrate massive amounts of information (e.g., real-time sensor readings and weather reports to social media posts and satellite imagery) simultaneously and continuously, detecting subtle trends and triggers that would otherwise go unnoticed by humans. For instance, Google's flood forecasting[10] initiatives in parts of India leverage machine-learning models that integrate historical flood data with current weather conditions to provide alerts days in advance, allowing local authorities to evacuate vulnerable communities.[11] Similarly, wildfire detection programs, such as those using NASA's satellite feeds combined with AI-driven analysis,[12] have dramatically improved the speed at which first responders are alerted to new fires, saving both lives and critical resources.[13] Beyond natural disasters, AI can also be used to forecast financial crises or disease outbreaks by analyzing volumes of global market or public health data to spot anomalies and rapidly emerging trends. By harnessing these predictive capabilities, leaders can adopt proactive strategies to predict, prevent, and prepare for disasters. For example, AI models can be used to direct and prioritize evacuations, allocate emergency resources ahead of time, and adjust economic and regulatory policies to enhance community resilience and reduce the potential damage wrought by disasters.

One popular framework that can help leaders conceptualize crisis readiness and response is the **5Ps model–Predict, Prevent, Prepare, Perform,** and **Post-Action Assessment.**[14] Although there are variations of the model, it generally provides a comprehensive pathway for crisis management and leadership.

In the Predict phase, leaders identify potential risks and vulnerabilities by scanning the internal and external environments.[15] Risk assessments, scenario planning, and trend analyses are integral for anticipating worst-case scenarios. These assessments involve not only ranking potential problems but also their likelihood of occurring and the severity of their consequences if they do.

The Cassandra Conundrum



Andrew Bain/Alamy Stock Photo

In Greek mythology, Cassandra was a Trojan princess cursed with the ability to foretell disasters but then to have no one believe her warnings. It isn't easy to be a leader who sees disasters coming when no one else does. That was the case for Kotoku Wamura, a mayor of a small fishing village in northeast Japan.[16] He had been witness to the consequences of two tsunamis (one in 1896 he'd heard about from family and one in 1933 that he lived through himself). Wamura had seen the death and destruction tsunamis could bring and was determined to prevent it from happening again. Wamura was also aware of the presence of "tsunami stones," ancient markers in the mountains and hills warning people about how high they would need to retreat after a powerful earthquake to avoid the subsequent tsunami. When he became mayor, Wamura made it his mission to construct a 51-ft seawall, and a flood gate that could be raised and lowered when needed. Construction took more than a decade and was completed at tremendous cost. Because of this, Wamura was widely mocked in the press for wasting money on a pointless eyesore. Wamura passed away in 1997, having never seen his seawall and floodgate used for their intended purpose. But when the great earthquake of 2011 struck, his village was saved and sustained almost no damage. Today, he is hailed as a hero.



EVAN VUCCI/AP Images

In the summer of 2005, President George W. Bush became deeply concerned about the threat of a future pandemic after reading John M. Barry's *The Great Influenza* (2004). Moved by the harrowing details of the 1918 flu outbreak and recognizing the potential devastation of an unprepared nation, Bush championed a comprehensive preparedness strategy in the face of critics who believed that such pandemics were a thing of the past.[17] Bush's $7 billion plan included the creation of large-scale medical stockpiles of masks, ventilators, and other critical supplies, as well as proposals for improved coordination between federal and state agencies.[18] Unfortunately, Bush's concerns about a potential disaster were not shared by subsequent administrations, and the CDC's Strategic National Stockpile was massively depleted during the outbreaks of the H1N1 flu in 2009 and the Ebola virus in 2014.[19] The stockpile was not

replaced, and when a true global pandemic finally did emerge in late 2019, the United States was left scrambling for the supplies Bush had insisted they have on hand.[20] As one might guess, much finger-pointing among political rivals and leaders ensued.

1. Sometimes being an effective crisis leader means risking one's reputation to prepare for the unlikely. What kinds of consequences can leaders face for insisting on preparedness, even for very unlikely events?
2. Bush's plans for protecting the United States were undermined because his vision didn't carry over into subsequent administrations, both of which (Obama and Trump) were critical of his leadership. What role do you think this animosity played in ignoring Bush's warnings?

The Prevent phase involves concrete actions to reduce or eliminate the risks or conditions that might trigger a crisis. This could include making policy changes, conducting safety audits, training staff, and making investments in technology or infrastructure. Prevention initiatives also can include establishing ethical guidelines and corporate values that discourage behaviors with potential to trigger a crisis, such as fraud or negligence.[21]

The Prepare phase focuses on the organization's readiness to respond if a crisis occurs despite prevention efforts. This includes creating crisis communication plans, forming emergency response teams, and conducting simulations or drills to hone responsiveness.[22]A well-structured preparation strategy helps to ensure that resources—both human and logistical—can be quickly mobilized. Here, early warning signs should be identified, and specific team members should be assigned to specific critical roles, with backups designated for each. Prudent leaders will conduct regular crisis simulations and drills and crisis plans should also be updated regularly as potential threats emerge and mitigating technology becomes available.

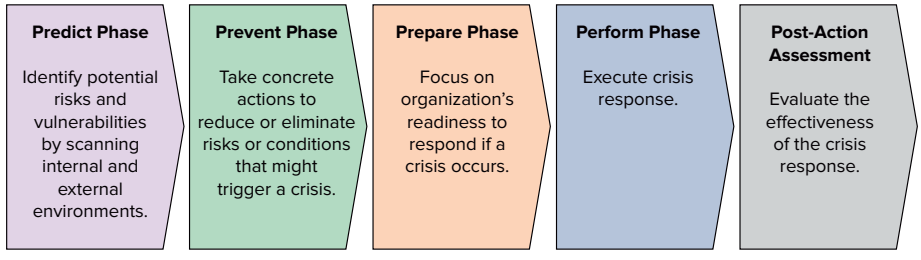


FIGURE 12.1 The 5Ps Model

The Perform phase is where leaders and their teams execute their crisis response. Leaders must "perform" under pressure, guiding teams through confusion, high stakes, and potential conflict. Leaders must assess the scope of the problem, direct the response confidently, and keep their team informed as the situation unfolds. For example, on April 17, 2018, Southwest Flight 1380 from New York to Dallas experienced an engine failure that sent a fan blade through the fuselage, ripping a hole in the plane and causing rapid decompression. One passenger was partially sucked out of the plane and later pronounced dead. Fortunately for the passengers, the pilot was Tammie Jo Schults, an experienced former U.S. Navy pilot. Audio logs from the disaster show Schults calmly describing the situation to air traffic control in Philadelphia, noting the unfolding disaster and requesting that the runways be cleared for an emergency landing.[23] She then landed the crippled plane, saving passengers and crew on board.

Finally, the Post-Action Assessment phase involves critically evaluating the effectiveness of the crisis response, identifying where things went wrong or could be improved, and making changes to future crisis

management plans based on what was learned. For example, after the 2003 Columbia space shuttle disaster, NASA did an extensive review of what had gone wrong—from the immediate technical failure (e.g., foam debris damaging the orbiter's wing) to the deep-rooted organizational culture and decision-making processes contributing to the tragedy.[24] Willingness to directly confront leadership and communication failures enabled NASA to make clear recommendations on risk management, communication reforms, and organizational restructuring to prevent future disasters.[25] The 5P model can help to simplify a complex process by dividing crisis leadership into logical, sequential steps. Embedding the elements of this process into organizational structures can help leaders increase their organization's overall resilience.[26]

A Hero Till the End

Despite not being American, Rick Rescorla left Britain to volunteer to serve in the Vietnam War. He experienced harrowing combat in the Ia Drang Valley (memorialized in the 2002 film "*We Were Soldiers"* starring Mel Gibson) and was described by the legendary General Hal Moore as "the best platoon leader I ever saw." After his military career ended, Rescorla taught criminal justice at the University of South Carolina for three years. He was then retained as head of security for Morgan Stanley at the World Trade Center in New York City. Convinced that the Twin Towers would be targeted again after the attempted bombing in 1993, Rescorla developed and enforced strict evacuation drills, making the entire staff evacuate the building every three months and simulating blocked passages to make sure that everyone knew alternative evacuation routes. Because Morgan Stanley offices were on the 59th to 74th floors of the South Tower, these safety drills often drew skeptical glances and derision from many Morgan Stanley employees. Yet, Rescorla's commitment to ensuring the safety of the staff never wavered. On September 11, 2001, Rescorla's preparations proved tragically prescient. Following the first plane's impact, Rescorla immediately began leading Morgan Stanley employees out of the South Tower. With steady composure, he guided them down the dark stairwell, singing Cornish marching songs into his bullhorn to calm panicked colleagues. After leading most of the employees to safety, Rescorla returned to the building and began to climb back up to search for any remaining stragglers. It was the last time anyone saw him. After a lifetime of service and sacrifice, Rescorla died when the tower collapsed. He is credited with saving 2,867 lives.[27]

1. Similar to Kotoku Wamura, Rick Rescorla was something of a Cassandra-like figure. What role do you think his prior experiences had in making him so highly attuned to potential threats?
2. If you do foresee potential for disaster, what steps can you take to try to convince your own leaders (or followers) to take these threats seriously? What should you do if you're ignored?

SWOT ANALYSIS (LO 12-3)

The previous section explains why the need to prepare is important but doesn't provide a clear blueprint for how to go about doing this preparation. One straightforward approach that can be used to prepare your team for an impending—or potential—disaster is by conducting what is called a SWOT analysis. A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis is a widely used strategic planning tool.[28,29] By systematically categorizing and evaluating internal and external factors, leaders generate insight into where their team/organization stands, where they want to go, and how they might get there.[30]

The main idea is to document and record your team's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to create a shared understanding among the group and then leverage this information to make informed decisions. This allows SWOT analysis to serve multiple purposes: It provides some degree of self-awareness and reflection; it facilitates strategic decision making; it helps get the team aligned in terms of understanding the situation; and it lays out a long-term vision in terms of priorities and goals. Below we detail what belongs in each of these categories and provide a working illustration using the character Simba from Disney's 1994 classic *The Lion King.*

Strengths: These are internal capabilities and resources an individual, team, or organization uses effectively that can provide competitive advantage. Such strengths include financial resources, interpersonal connections, or internal attributes such as leader or team member knowledge. In *The Lion King*, Simba has a number of potential strengths. He's the rightful heir to the lion's pride, has the moral support of allies such as Nala, Timon, and Pumbaa, and has innate courage.

Weaknesses: These can be characterized as internal limitations that may hinder an individual, team, or organization's performance and keep them from being successful. Such weaknesses can include lack of experience, poor team integration or cohesion, or limited access to critical infrastructure and technologies. In *The Lion King*, Simba has a few notable weaknesses. These include lingering self-doubt and (misplaced) guilt related to the death of Mufasa. Simba also lacks both leadership experience and the connections he would have had if he had grown up in the pride rather than in exile.

Opportunities: These are defined as external factors in the environment that can be leveraged for growth and success. They can include technological innovations, emerging markets, or a favorable regulatory environment. Opportunities for Simba include building alliances with the lionesses and the moral and emotional growth that helped make him wiser as a possible leader.

Threats: External elements that can hinder success or stability, threats can include competition, economic downturns, or negative public opinion. For Simba, potential threats include Scar (his evil uncle who wants to claim the throne), Scar's alliance with the hyenas, the unfolding ecological disaster, and disunity of the residents of the Pride Lands resulting from Scar's policies as pride leader.

SWOT analysis can be used for more than just crisis planning. It can also be used as a way to address a range of problems you'll inevitably face as a leader. For example, you can use SWOT analysis to help in your leadership development journey (refer to the worksheet below).

Figure 12.2 **SWOT Analysis Worksheet for Leaders**

Instructions:

Reflect on your leadership role and current leadership situation. Fill in each section with honest and specific observations. You may complete this worksheet alone or with feedback from peers, mentors, or team members.

Leader's Name: _____

Role/Title: _____

Date: _____

Strengths: What do I do well? What resources, skills, or qualities give me an advantage as a leader?

(Continued)

Weaknesses: Where do I struggle? What areas require improvement or development?

Opportunities: What external trends or changes can I leverage? What partnerships, tools, or learning could help me grow?

Threats: What external factors could derail my leadership or negatively impact my team's performance?

Reflections and Next Steps

Which strength can I immediately use to address a current challenge?

What is one weakness I should prioritize for improvement?

What opportunity am I not currently pursuing that I should explore?

What can I do now to mitigate one of the threats I've identified?

Follow-Up Plan

Action Step	Timeline	Support/Resources Needed	Accountability Partner

AI in the Workplace: Error. Anomaly Detected!

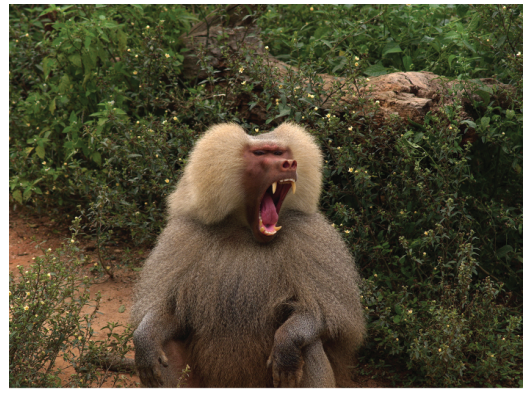
AI systems are generally optimized for ordinary conditions, using historical data to identify patterns and make predictions. However, in times of crisis, where events unfold rapidly and deviate substantially from prior trends (so-called "Black Swan" events[31]), AI tools can become unreliable or even hazardous. Algorithms that rely on long-term data may fail to properly account for sudden disruptions, such as natural disasters, large-scale accidents, or unprecedented market fluctuations (which can become amplified into "flash-crash" scenarios by high-volume AI-driven selloffs). To reduce these risks, leaders should establish rigorous oversight practices that incorporate human judgment (e.g., requiring human input when serious anomalies are detected), stress-test models with simulated crisis scenarios, deploy multiple models with different algorithmic approaches to verify high-stakes decisions, and demonstrate humility and transparency when communicating about AI's potential limitations. By ensuring that subject matter experts (SMEs) and data scientists collaborate on algorithm development, monitoring performance in real time, and empowering decision makers to intervene when outputs seem off-base, organizations can reduce the likelihood of catastrophic AI errors. Investing in continuous learning and regularly updating models based on fresh data further help AI systems adapt to new conditions. Ultimately, balancing AI's predictive power with prudent governance will better protect organizations, and the communities they serve, when faced with unexpected, extreme events.

STRESS AND LEADERSHIP (LO 12-4)

When asked to describe a leader under stress, most people will picture someone who maintains composure, provides a vision or plan to resolve the crisis or challenge, and is resilient in the face of setbacks. Ideally, all of these would be true. Yet, behind the scenes leaders frequently grapple with a range of stressors, from high-stakes decision making to complex interpersonal issues within their teams.[32] Recent surveys suggest that as many as 68% of all managers have experienced burnout in the past year.[33] Understanding how stress influences leadership is essential to provide a complete picture of what it means to be a leader.

Stress arises when individuals perceive that the demands they face exceed their resources and coping abilities.[34] Examples can include tight deadlines, financial pressures, stakeholder scrutiny, team conflicts, and personal life challenges. While moderate stress can sometimes sharpen focus and motivation, excessive or chronic stress can deplete cognitive and emotional resources, leading to poor decision making, burnout, and negative ripple effects on subordinates.[35]

Leaders who operate under constant stress may experience psychological strain that diminishes their empathy, strategic vision, and capacity to think clearly. These diminished capacities can translate into leadership behavior that is more reactive than proactive. For instance, a leader struggling with stress or burnout might find themselves micromanaging, exploding in anger, or resorting to harsh communication styles.[36,37] Similarly, as stress persists, many leaders will instinctively shift towards more directive or autocratic styles of leadership. Although this can be beneficial in emergencies by limiting decision-making/implementation time, these behaviors also tend to erode followers' trust, increase their stress, and negatively affect team/organization culture. And fixing this issue can be difficult because many leaders, especially senior leaders, believe that admitting to being overwhelmed or stressed shows vulnerability and may cost them a promotion or even their job. This can also lead not only to health problems (see the section below) but to inherent challenges implementing interventions to either relieve the stress or to coach these leaders on better ways of coping with the stress.[38]



John Neff/Shutterstock

All of this may make you think that you'll never want to be a leader. After all, why take on a role that's going to stress you out? But this may be oversimplifying the actual relationship between leadership and stress. On the one hand, the pressures and responsibilities inherent in leadership roles can mean that leaders experience a great deal of stress. On the other hand, leaders also have a great deal more control and autonomy over their work and that can help to reduce stress. So, which is it? Well, it's actually a little bit of both. And it really depends on the nature of the leadership position. To illustrate, consider our primate cousins, the baboons. Studies looking at cortisol levels (stress hormones) in feces (no one said science was glamorous) reveal that the alpha male—the highest ranking member of the troop—shows the highest level of stress.[39] These leaders must make decisions about where to go to find food, when to eat, whether to fight or avoid external threats, sort out internal conflicts within the troop, and deal with near-constant challenges to their authority by younger males trying to take over the top spot. So, while the alphas are typically first in line when it comes to eating and mating, their job isn't easy. The second most stressed member of the troop is the lowest ranking male. They don't get to mate very often and are frequently bullied. Not much fun. So, who is the least stressed? It turns out that it's the second-highest ranking male. They get many of the

benefits of being in charge (high rank) and are often in an alliance with the leader. But they also don't face threats to their position or have to make decisions and can choose when and how to mount a challenge for the top spot. Human leadership positions can be very similar. Top lieutenants get many of the perks that come with being a leader, but their job is mostly to execute on and transmit orders from above. This is one of the reasons that many people voluntarily stay in the position of assistant coach, assistant principal, vice president, etc. It isn't lack of skill so much as lack of appetite for the grind that comes with being the top dog (or baboon...).

A Diamond Is a Piece of Coal That Survived under Pressure

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, Gennaro Arma, captain of the Diamond Princess cruise ship, found himself on the front lines of a global crisis. Having been exposed to the virus in Hong Kong, the infected Diamond Princess passengers were quarantined in their staterooms for weeks, not knowing whether the infection would lead to their deaths. Ultimately, more than 700 people were infected and 13 died after being infected. Throughout this ordeal, Captain Arma became a beacon of steadfast calm and compassion, delivering regular messages over the intercom that were infused with a gentle humor that offered the crew and passengers some solace in a nerve-racking, uncertain time.[40] He referred to both passengers and crew as "my gladiators," highlighting not just their resilience but also the unity and solidarity that defined their collective response.[41] Arma walked the hallways and decks, answering questions, reassuring passengers through closed doors, and in his thick Italian accent wishing them "buon appetito" at mealtimes. Arma's dedication to passengers' well-being was evident in countless thoughtful gestures, such as sending Valentine's Day tokens and uplifting notes to those confined to their cabins. His reassuring presence and measured responses helped minimize fear, even when the situation felt dire, and criticism swirled around the quarantine measures. Undaunted by the risk to himself, Arma remained aboard to the very end, as a good captain should, refusing to step onto dry land until every passenger and member of his crew were safely disembarked. His final message summed up his approach: "We are all on the final leg of our journey. Stay strong, look after yourselves. We will finish as we started: together. Thank you, my gladiators, and buon appetito."[42]

1. Some people become more selfish when threatened while others become more selfless. What kinds of factors do you think drives this difference?
2. Do you think that there are individual differences you could select for when hiring leaders for positions with these kinds of dangerous situations? What do you think these might be?

Cognitive Resource Theory (LO 12-5)

Cognitive resource theory (CRT)[43,44] offers a framework to help understand how leaders' cognitive abilities and experiences are deployed under different conditions of stress. According to CRT, two major resources influence leadership effectiveness: intelligence and experience. Under low-stress conditions, leaders have time to effectively leverage their intelligence (i.e., reasoning, problem-solving, and creativity) to guide their teams. As a result, it's expected that intelligence will predict leadership effectiveness and success best in low-stress conditions, but not in high-stress conditions. In contrast, CRT argues that leader experience is more effective in high-stress situations, where leaders are more likely to use tried-and-true techniques that have worked in the past. However, in low-stress situations, their reliance on established methods means that they are less likely to innovate or optimize.

Although CRT provides an intuitive perspective on how leaders might behave under stress, there have been notable criticisms of the theory. For example, there is an inherent danger for experienced leaders to rely on established methods, even if the stressor is novel or the leader's experience doesn't match the context. In this way, habitual responses (doing what's been done in the past) can become maladaptive. A second, more empirical criticism of the theory is that evidence suggests that intelligence not only predicts leader effectiveness well in both high- and low-stress situations,[45] but that it may even be a better predictor of performance under demanding circumstances.[46]

Leadership and Health

As with stress, holding a leadership position can be a double-edged sword when it comes to health outcomes. When addressing the relationship between holding leadership positions and health, many people invoke examples of how quickly younger presidents seem to age while they are in office. However, the empirical research on this question suggests that this isn't the case for most leaders. For example, a large-scale study of Swedish CEOs showed no relationship between holding leadership positions and health outcomes.[47] Interestingly, that study did find both a positive relationship between being in good health and becoming a CEO and also that CEOs with poor health are more likely to turnover. Another study of British civil servants actually showed that those in leadership positions typically had better health than those who did not.[48] A more recent study from Germany has shown that leaders also deal with sickness in a unique way.[49] Specifically, when they're sick, leaders are much less likely to be absent from work. Rather, they tend to come in to work anyways and tough it out.



(upper left)Photo 12/Contributor/Universal Images Group/Getty Images; (upper right)TOSHIFUMI KITAMURA/Staff/AFP/Getty Images

(center left) World Politics Archive (WPA)/Alamy Stock Photo; (center right) Mark Wilson/Staff/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

(lower left) Handout/Getty Images News/Getty Images; (lower right) Ron Sachs-Pool/Getty Images News/Getty Images

In Your Dreams

One of the most important contributors to health is whether or not you get enough sleep.[50] And even though we aren't supposed to be sleeping at work (for most jobs), leadership, sleep, and crises are all connected as well. For example, the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989,[51] the Challenger space shuttle disaster in 1986,[52] and the Three-Mile Island nuclear disaster in 1979 all were linked to sleep deprivation in key decision makers and leaders.[53] Chronic sleep deprivation, from stress, long work hours, or challenging shift schedules, can impair cognitive functions such as judgment, creativity, and problem solving.[54] Yet 43% of all leaders report that they don't get enough sleep at least four nights a week,[55] frequently because they're too consumed with problems at work or because they believe they can trade sleep for productivity.[56] Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that leaders who fail to get enough sleep aren't merely crankier but are also more likely to act abusively towards,[57] and less likely to be seen as charismatic by, their followers.[58]

And sleepiness doesn't just drive leader behaviors—leader behaviors also can drive sleepiness. There's plenty of research showing that the employees of abusive supervisors are more likely to report sleepiness and declines in creativity and productivity.[59,60] And, if you're drawing connections, there's also evidence that when a leader experiences sleep deprivation, their subsequent behaviors at work result in less sleep for their subordinates as well.[61]

So, what's to be done? Well, for starters, get yourself on a regular sleep schedule and make sure you feel well-rested before you go to work. But as a leader, it's also important to pay attention to your followers' chronotypes.[62] **Chronotypes** are individual differences in the body clock when people feel most awake and ready to work. People talk about "morning larks" and "night owls." As a leader, be aware that not everyone has the same circadian rhythm (the daily biological cycle of sleep and wakefulness). For example, young adults tend to be night owls, so pushing them to be at work (or school) early tends to be counterproductive. Consider being flexible in terms of schedules if you can. Try to align shifts for when workers feel their best and save important tasks and decisions for when you feel most energized. By focusing on workers' well-being, you can promote a healthier, happier workplace and be the leader of their dreams. And not the stuff of nightmares!

1. When are you the most productive during the workday? Earlier or later in the day? What kinds of differences do you see in your work at these different times?
2. What kinds of active steps do you take to schedule your work to maximize your work during productive times and minimize your work during less productive times?

Managing the Health of Others

Leaders often end up as the workplace "health gatekeeper," asked to decide whether someone is truly sick, manage coverage, and enforce policies fairly. The problem is that "calling in sick to get out of work" is such a common trope that it can become oddly performative for everyone involved. The movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* is pop-culture shorthand for this, a reminder that absenteeism sometimes blends legitimate illness with an embellished explanation. Yet, when leaders treat every sick call like a courtroom drama ("prove it"), they risk turning a simple absence into a trust problem. Research shows that requiring doctor's notes for short absences can push people into unnecessary clinic visits, and evidence on whether self-certification reduces abuse is mixed.[63]

Still, leaders are more than gatekeepers. They're also signals. Their reactions teach the team what the organization truly values about health. "Presenteeism," or showing up while sick, is widespread and tied to workplace attendance pressure.[64,65] *Parks and Recreation* famously turned this into comedy when Leslie, burning with fever, insists on giving a big presentation anyway (Season 3, Episode 2). Research finds that when leaders model this kind of behavior, employees are more likely to do the same[66].

Then come the serious moments, such as when an employee faces cancer, a mental health crisis, or a family emergency. Here, leaders must shift from gatekeeping to genuine care. Leader behavior and leader–employee relationships have strong links to employee well-being.[67] Practically, this means resisting the urge to "diagnose," protecting privacy, and leaning on clear processes. In the United States, disability-related inquiries and requests for medical information are constrained, and organizations generally need to keep medical information confidential and limited to legitimate business needs.[68] For serious health conditions and extended leave, leaders should not improvise. They should partner with HR and follow established medical certification pathways when applicable.[69]

Tips for managing subordinate health issues:

1. **Separate process from person.** "You do not owe me details. Let's talk about what you need to step away and how we'll cover work."
2. **Be consistent and privacy-minded.** Share only what is necessary, involve HR or occupational health as appropriate, and do not turn someone's health into team gossip.
3. **Do not reward martyrdom.** Praise good planning and responsible boundaries, not contagious hero stories.
4. **Follow through.** Accommodations and check-ins mean little if they disappear after the first sympathetic conversation.

LEADERSHIP IN EXTREMIS

Anytime you're in a leadership role, unforeseen challenges and uncertainties are a given. However, in extremis situations, where leaders and followers face life-threatening or otherwise extraordinary stakes, the ability to guide a team effectively is tested to the limit. Whether it's a military unit navigating a combat zone, a rescue crew responding to a natural disaster, or a medical team operating in a high-risk environment, leadership in extremis settings requires a unique set of skills and mindset.

In extremis leadership is often described as leadership that occurs under conditions of imminent physical danger or extreme psychological stress, where the stakes can include loss of life.[70] In these extreme scenarios, leaders and followers operate in unpredictable, hostile, or otherwise high-risk environments that demand swift decision making, unwavering trust, and strong moral and ethical grounding.[71] In many ways, in extremis leadership is like crisis leadership. Both require the leader to stay calm and to be decisive. However, in an in extremis leadership situation, the potential consequences of failure includes the death of the leader or their followers and dealing with the situational threat or danger is a central feature of what the job entails.

In extremis leadership puts a premium on collective resilience. Teams facing extreme conditions and threats have to rely on one another to maintain physical and psychological well-being.[72] Moreover, the strong demand for leader authenticity is extremely high, as followers tend to be highly attuned to any potential deceptions that might lead to risk or harm. The other major difference is that in extremis leadership is frequently required, and expected, to be sustained over the long term and across multiple threat events, which also puts a premium on the ability to maintain team cohesion and trust.

HEALING AFTER THE CRISIS

As we discussed in **Chapter 5**, leaders play a critical function as supporters of their followers. It should be no surprise then that leaders also play an important role supporting followers experiencing the lingering effects of trauma in the wake of a crisis. Following a traumatic crisis, some—if not most— of those who lived through it are likely to experience some form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This can manifest through symptoms such as hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, and emotional numbing.[73]

Leaders often set the tone for whether recovery is taken seriously or treated as an inconvenience. It is important that leaders signal that the well-being and healing of their followers is paramount. They can do this by engaging in trauma-informed practices, such as being mindful of triggers, maintaining predictable routines, and offering flexible work arrangements when needed.[74] For example, after a serious event, such as witnessing

a workplace accident that results in a death, leaders can respond in simple, practical ways. They can check in privately with affected employees, point them to counseling or employee assistance resources, and, when needed, allow a gradual return to normal duties. Organizations like the U.S. Army have introduced resilience training programs with the goal of both preventing and healing the traumas that can be associated with active combat experiences. These programs highlight mindfulness, psychological coping skills, and peer support.[75] But a crucial factor in the effectiveness of these kinds of programs is the direct support of commanding officers who personally champion them. This direct support demonstrates a commitment to both safety and emotional well-being, bolstering trust and solidarity among service members.

Beyond working to reduce PTSD symptoms, leaders can also help people grow after a traumatic event. Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is defined as positive psychological change arising from the struggle with challenging life circumstances.[76] Growth is more likely when people have a chance for **meaning-making**, or simply making sense of what happened and what it changed. Leaders can support this by offering a short, structured team discussion or optional journaling prompts that help employees name lessons learned, shifts in priorities, or new coping strategies.[77] When handled with care, this kind of reflection can make strong emotions feel less isolating and more normal after a traumatic event.

Leaders can also shape the climate by encouraging open conversation and showing appropriate openness themselves. For example, a leader might briefly acknowledge that the event was hard for them, too, and share one concrete step they are taking to cope, such as talking with a counselor, leaning on peers, or sticking to a routine. That kind of modeling can build trust and remind people that they are not alone.[78] It also reinforces that recovery and growth are supported by the whole team, and that every voice, regardless of rank, can add something useful.

In facilitating post-traumatic growth, leaders also play an integral role in *sensemaking*, a process that helps individuals contextualize chaotic or frightening experiences and see potential pathways toward renewal.[79] For example, airlines frequently conduct thorough debriefings and employee counseling sessions following near-miss aviation incidents. By systematically collecting feedback, acknowledging near-fatal errors, and discussing how protocols might be improved, leaders can help transform a harrowing event into a platform for learning.

BECOMING THE CRISIS: INSURGENCY LEADERSHIP (LO 12-6)

It isn't common, but there may be times in your career when you'll need to lead a group or team against powerful stakeholders determined to maintain the status quo. The challenge may occur inside your organization (e.g., senior leadership or a department that traditionally holds a lot of sway), in your industry (e.g., long-term, leading companies trying to crush newly formed innovators), or within your community (e.g., political factions bent on maintaining control). In these circumstances, you may need to devise a way to upend the status quo, often in the face of resistance and frequently with a huge deficit in terms of resources. How might you pull this off? By becoming the crisis for those in power. The following is guidance on what makes for a successful insurgency.

Leading an insurgency involves confronting extreme resource asymmetry, because insurgents typically lack the military and economic advantages held by established powers. Historical figures such as Mao Zedong (who defeated Chiang Kai Shek's Nationalist forces in the Chinese Civil War) and T.E. Lawrence (aka Lawrence of Arabia, who played a key role in the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire) demonstrated that much smaller forces can succeed by leveraging strategic innovation, ideological cohesion, and the capacity to win

popular support, rather than relying on conventional military parity. Mao argued in *On Guerrilla Warfare*[80] that a weaker force can compete with a stronger one by staying mobile, striking in small actions, and fighting a long campaign that slowly wears down the other side. Lawrence's well-documented experiences during World War I, where he helped coordinate Arab forces against the Ottoman Empire, also points to the value of local partners and real cultural knowledge. Both cases suggest that strong local roots can sometimes make up for big gaps in money, equipment, or formal power.[81]

Insurgent leaders also tend to pair big-picture messaging with practical flexibility. Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, for instance, used broad appeals to social justice to bring different groups together against a common enemy.[82] That often goes along with steady public messaging, building parallel structures to provide basic services, and showing what governance might look like if they are successful. By speaking to local grievances and presenting themselves as a better alternative to an abusive regime, such movements can build enough credibility to attract new supporters. Over time, this also involves framing the story so authorities appear self-serving or captured by outsiders, while the insurgents present themselves as defenders of cultural or national identity.

To mitigate the advantages associated with an opponent's superior resources, insurgent leaders have to adopt unorthodox tactics that foster surprise and psychological pressure. Employing guerrilla warfare (e.g., hit-and-run attacks, sabotage, surveillance) can unbalance the enemy's sense of security and promote paranoia and second-guessing. Decentralization ensures that local cells have enough autonomy to adapt quickly to changing circumstances, a principle widely embraced in various revolutionary contexts, from communist uprisings to nationalist rebellions.[83] Such groups also strive to erode an incumbent's morale through misinformation and highlighting governmental missteps. Crucially, insurgents must remain patient and selective, choosing engagements that play to their strengths and avoid large-scale, conventional clashes where they would likely be overwhelmed.

The lessons for how to fight an asymmetric insurgency can frequently be found in competitive sports, where well-funded franchises buy the best players and coaches and leave the rest of the competition trying to find alternative ways to win. An example can be found in the career of the late college football coach Mike Leach, renowned for pioneering the "Air Raid" offense, and for taking the time to actually teach a course in insurgency leadership. At schools such as Texas Tech, Washington State, and Mississippi State, which typically could not recruit top-tier talent at the same pace as bluebloods like Michigan, Alabama, and Ohio State, Leach opted for an unconventional offensive strategy built around a high-volume passing game.[84] The emphasis on spreading the field, running a smaller set of plays to perfection, and empowering quarterbacks to adapt on-the-fly resembles the decentralized, flexible tactics of successful insurgent leaders. By introducing relentless offensive pressure, Leach's teams forced opponents to react continually, creating openings that brute strength alone might not have otherwise allowed. In addition, Leach also motivated players by embracing a pirate theme. Leach saw pirates as individuals who didn't wait for permission, challenged the status quo, and charted their own course. He urged his players to "swing their sword," a phrase he used to encourage them to play fearlessly, aggressively, and with confidence.

One final consideration on insurgency leadership is that while it can be fun and interesting to discuss insurgencies and what allows them to win, it should be remembered that many of these movements must also reckon with moral and practical concerns regarding violence, civilian harm, and long-term governance. It should be recognized that sometimes leadership can also be shown in negotiated agreements, like the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland in 1998 or, more recently, the demilitarization of FARC in Columbia in 2016, which allow insurgencies to make peace and transition to working within existing systems. Often this means finding a new leader, one with diplomatic finesse and a willingness to compromise.

Making a Stand

The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy has many moments in it that will bring a tear to your eye or put a lump in your throat. But one of the most compelling scenes in the second film, *The Two Towers*, is when King Théoden of Rohan is preparing the defenses of Helm's Deep, the last refuge of his people. Théoden moves around the fortress, loudly proclaiming that no one has ever defeated him at this fortress and that the approaching army outside is sure to fail as well. Aragorn, another character with substantial military experience of his own, follows Théoden around, pointing out that Théoden's forces are massively outnumbered and consist mostly of those who are too young or old to be effective fighters. At some point, Théoden has had enough and snaps back, "Look at my men. Their courage hangs by a thread! If this is to be our end, then I would have them make such an end, as to be worthy of remembrance." This moment crystallizes the difference between the two heroes and demonstrates why Théoden is a worthy king. He's not disconnected from reality. He knows that his people are counting on him to save them, and he wants to give them every possible chance of surviving.

Leaders can draw profound lessons about commitment, duty, and the power of shared purpose by examining events throughout history when individuals chose to make a heroic last stand against impossible odds and why they did so. In *Last Stands: Why Men Fight When All Is Lost*, Michael Walsh[85] discusses the universal human impulse to resist overwhelming odds and remain steadfast to a cause. Such moments, whether on the battlefield, the playing field, in political movements, or within communities, underscore how critical a sense of identity and solidarity can be when motivating teams or groups.

One frequently cited example of a heroic last stand is the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE. King Leonidas and his Spartan warriors confronted a vastly larger Persian army (immortalized by Gerard Butler in the 2007 movie *300*). This story shows that a shared code of honor and a leader's visible commitment to that code can inspire extraordinary courage in followers. Similarly, the defenders of the Alamo in 1836 chose to stand their ground against the Mexican forces led by General Santa Anna. Even though defeat was likely, the resolute leadership of figures such as William Travis, Davy Crockett, and Jim Bowie galvanized the defenders to hold out, turning their defeat into a lasting symbol of sacrifice for the Texan cause. In both of these cases, the defenders were also motivated to make a stand by demonstrating an intense commitment to the values of freedom and autonomy, values that came to define the cultures of Greek city-states and early America.

In each of these historic instances, strong leadership manifests not only in tactical expertise but in the leader's ability to unify their followers around a cause greater than themselves. Leaders who demonstrate personal commitment, and who are willing to bear the costs themselves, can strengthen others' courage and sense of duty. These stories also show the impact of clear vision and moral clarity: People are more inclined to stand firm if they firmly believe in the significance of their objective. Ultimately, the heroism of last stands serves as a reminder for today's leaders that genuine conviction, coupled with an inclusive and purpose-driven approach, can galvanize organizations, even when the odds appear insurmountable.

1. Think of a time in your own life when you, or someone close to you, made a stand based on principle, even though the odds were against you. What was going through your head at that time? When you look back on that situation, how do you think of it? Are you proud? Do you have regrets?
2. What is the difference between making a heroic last stand and an idiotic, stubborn decision? Why do we valorize some hopeless efforts and not others?

Thinking Like a Leader

In a crisis, how you conduct yourself can be a powerful tool. Followers instinctively look to leaders for cues, both spoken and unspoken, for how to react. If you appear calm, composed, and deliberate, they will be more likely to be assured. This does not mean hiding the truth or pretending to have all the answers. Inexperienced leaders frequently feel pressure to act immediately and decisively when faced with a crisis. While timely action is important, impulsive decisions made to appear "decisive" can compound problems. In a crisis situation, a pause isn't the same thing as being paralyzed. It gives everyone a moment to reflect, gather facts, listen to others, and then act with purpose.

One of the great pitfalls in crisis leadership is the illusion that you can control all variables. Crises expose complexity, reveal hidden interdependencies, and frequently unfold in nonlinear ways. Leaders who fixate on trying to control the situation often exhaust themselves and alienate others. Instead of trying to control everything, focus on influencing what you can, setting clear priorities, communicating clearly, and enabling others to act. Crises don't unfold in predictable stages. Real leaders remain agile, adapting their approach while trying to keep their organization aligned with their core values and long-term goals.

Another factor to consider is the human element. You need to know who you can rely on in a crisis situation and to have established a relationship with your followers such that they have trust in you. You also need to understand that as a leader, you carry not only your own stress but that of your team as well. Stress can dull thinking, narrow perceptions, and erode your ability to empathize with others. In high-stress environments, poor communication, overreactions, and interpersonal breakdowns are more likely. One of the most overlooked responsibilities of a leader in a crisis situation is stress regulation, both for themselves and others. You must learn to monitor your internal state, pace yourself, and find time for restoration, even in small increments. Equally, you must create moments of psychological recovery for your team. A few words of encouragement or even a short pause to acknowledge the toll of the crisis can prevent long-term damage to your relationships. Moreover, never underestimate the power of humility during hard times. Saying "I don't know, but we'll figure it out together" often inspires more trust than pretending certainty where none exists.

Finally, it's also important to recognize that not every crisis is external. Many of the crises you'll face are internal. Ethical dilemmas, cultural fractures, failures of character are often more common and frequently no less consequential. And they're the ones that will nag at you afterwards because they'll feel more like something that could have been prevented or controlled.

To think like a leader is to see crisis not only as danger, but as a defining moment. It is to hold fast to principles while remaining responsive to reality. And above all, it is to remember that your job isn't simply to endure the storm, but to help others navigate it, learn from it, and emerge stronger from it on the other side.

IN THE NOT-TOO-DISTANT FUTURE...

Sooner than you think, you'll be in a leadership role when something goes sideways. It might be a safety issue, a data breach, a public mistake, a workplace accident, or a slow-building problem that suddenly explodes into the open. The uncomfortable truth is that you won't get perfect information, you will not have unlimited time, and people will still look to you for direction.

Start building your crisis habits before you need them. In your first weeks, do a quick "risk scan" of your team's work. Ask: What could hurt people, stop operations, or damage trust? Pick the top three scenarios and make a simple plan for each: early warning signs, who must be notified, and the first three actions you would take. Run one short practice drill, even if it's just a 20-minute tabletop conversation. Clarity beats complexity when stress is high.

When a real crisis hits, shrink the chaos. Form a small response group, meet briefly every day (or more often, if needed), and communicate on a steady rhythm. Say what you know, what you don't know yet, what you're doing next, and when the next update is coming. Anchor decisions in your values, because values keep you from drifting when the situation keeps changing.

Finally, treat recovery as part of leadership, not an afterthought. Once the immediate danger passes, hold a quick after-action review. Capture what worked, what failed, and one change you'll make so the same problem is less likely to happen again. Then check on people. Crises leave a mark, and teams take their cues from whether the leader notices that.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What makes a situation a true crisis rather than a hard problem, and who should have the authority to declare that a "crisis mode" response is needed?
2. In the 5P Model, which step do organizations tend to do worst in real life? What incentives or blind spots might explain that weakness?
3. Think about a crisis you have experienced or observed. Which of the 5Ps would have reduced harm the most, and what specific action should have happened earlier?
4. Use SWOT analysis to prepare for a plausible crisis in a team you know. What is one weakness that would become dangerous under pressure, and what is one strength you would deliberately design your response around?
5. Under stress, what leadership behaviors look decisive but actually increase risk or confusion for the team, and what would a better alternative look like?
6. In a high-stress situation, when should a leader rely more on experience than raw intelligence, and when might experience create overconfidence or tunnel vision?
7. After the immediate danger has passed, what should leaders do in the first week to learn from the event without turning the review into blame or defensiveness?
8. When is "insurgency leadership" a constructive way to challenge a failing status quo inside an organization, and what tactics should be off-limits even if the cause seems justified?

COMPETENCY CHECK: STRESS TOLERANCE

As we note in this chapter, leaders are going to be faced with stressful events, both routine and unexpected. One of the important things you'll need to manage is your own stress levels, as well as staying calm and setting a good example for your team. A leader who is unable to emotionally manage themselves is going to experience health problems and those who break down under pressure or who can't project confidence and calmness are going to potentially make situations worse. Consequently, it is a good idea to work on your own stress tolerance skills.

Stress tolerance is strongly associated with higher levels of Adjustment, a trait defined by emotional stability, calmness under pressure, and low levels of anxiety. Stress tolerance also is associated with a number of the personality derailers. First and foremost, Excitable, which reflects volatility and an inability to cope with setbacks, is negatively related to stress tolerance. In addition, other derailers such as Reserved (tendency to be withdrawn and bottle up feelings), Colorful (prone to overdramatize issues), Skeptical (a tendency to treat situations and people as threats), and Imaginative (characterized by unfocused and sometimes unrealistic ideas) also are negatively related to stress tolerance. To help you develop your stress tolerance, it may be useful to figure out what kinds of things trigger stress in your life and increase your self-awareness about the effectiveness of your coping strategies.

Exercise: Create Your Own Stress Diary

Purpose:

To help you identify your stress triggers, emotional reactions, and coping strategies. By tracking patterns over time, you can develop greater self-awareness and build your ability to manage stress—an essential leadership skill.

Instructions:

Step 1: Choose a Tracking Period

- Track your stress for 7 consecutive days.
- Aim to make 1–3 short entries per day (or more if helpful). If possible, pick regular times throughout the day (e.g., morning, afternoon, evening) so that your results are comparable.
- Keep your diary in a notebook, Google Doc, or note-taking app—whatever works for you.

Step 2: Create Your Entry Template

For each entry, record the following:

Prompt	Your Entry
Date & Time	
Stress Rating (1–10)	How stressed did you feel?
Situation/Event	What happened?
Physical/Emotional Response	What did you notice in your body or emotions?
Thoughts at the Time	What were you thinking?
Action Taken/Reaction	What did you do in response?
Outcome	How did it turn out?
Alternative Coping (optional)	What could you try next time?

Step 3: Reflect at the End of the Week

At the end of the week, answer these questions:

1. What types of situations triggered the most stress?
2. Were there common emotional or physical signs of stress?
3. What coping strategies worked best?
4. Are there any unhelpful patterns you noticed?
5. What could you do differently in the future?

Tips for Success:

- Be honest with yourself—this is for your personal development.
- Don't wait too long after a stressful moment to record it—fresh memories are more insightful.
- Use this diary as a starting point for testing new coping strategies and building resilience.

COMPETENCY CHECK: SAFETY AWARENESS

As a leader, you are responsible for the safety and security of those you are charged with leading. Consequently, it is important that you develop a mindset of being alert to potential threats and mitigating them. You should also encourage your team members to be willing to identify threats and bring them to your attention before they become a problem. In the following exercise, you'll be asked to look around an environment that you are familiar with and try to visualize it through the lens of potential threats and mitigation. Having an awareness of potential threats is not the same thing as paranoia (which concerns unreasonable fear), but it does mean sometimes thinking in terms of worst-case scenarios.

Safety Walkthrough Excercise: Identifying and Addressing Safty & Security Risks

Overview

This activity helps you develop the mindset of a leader responsible for safeguarding people in your environment. You will conduct a systematic safety walkthrough of a location you frequent (e.g., house, dorm, workplace, or school building). Your task is to identify potential hazards, note available safety equipment, and consider leadership responsibilities during two emergency scenarios: (1) a potential fire and (2) a potential gun-wielding threat.

Instructions

1. Choose Your Location

Select a site you know well (e.g., your dorm, apartment, house, workplace, or a school facility). Ensure you have permission to walk through the space if it's not your own residence.

2. Gather Materials

A notebook or electronic device to record observations. A copy of this worksheet (print or digital).

3. Walkthrough Steps

1. Entrance & Exits
   - Identify and list all entrances and exits.
   - Note whether emergency exits are clearly marked and unobstructed.
   - Check for the presence and functionality of exit signs, fire doors, or security access points (e.g., are there locked doors or required card-swipes?).
2. Emergency Equipment
   - Locate fire extinguishers and check their accessibility. Are they properly labeled and up to date on inspections?
   - Check for smoke detectors, alarms, and sprinkler systems. Are they present, well-maintained, and operational?
   - Identify any first-aid or emergency supply kits (e.g., flashlights, batteries, etc.). Are they fully stocked?
3. Potential Hazards
   - Observe hallways, stairwells, and rooms for trip hazards, loose cables, blocked pathways, or combustible materials stored improperly.
   - Note security vulnerabilities (e.g., propped-open doors, windows that don't lock).
   - Look for any area that lacks proper signage (e.g., "Emergency Exit Only," or "Restricted Access").
4. Leadership & Authority
   - Identify who is typically in charge of safety or security in this location (e.g., a landlord, building supervisor, security officer, resident assistant, or facilities manager).
   - Clarify how you would contact them quickly if you notice hazards or suspect a security threat.

4. Scenario Analysis

A. *Fire Scenario* If a fire starts in this environment:
   1. **Evacuation Routes:** Which exits would you direct people to use first?
   2. **Group Coordination:** If you were the leader, how would you ensure everyone (visitors, roommates, coworkers) evacuates safely?
   3. **Alerting Authorities**: Which organization or individual do you contact (e.g., fire department, campus security)?
   4. **Safety Equipment**: Which fire extinguisher or alarm would you rely on first? Where is it located?

B. *Gun-Wielding Threat Scenario* If an active threat occurs:
   1. **Secure or Evacuate?:** Where could people safely hide or barricade themselves? Which exit is safest if evacuation is possible?
   2. **Communication:** Who do you call first (campus security, 911)? How do you keep others informed?

3. **Leadership Role:** How can you direct others to safety without jeopardizing your own safety?
4. **Coordination with Authority:** Who onsite (RA, security officer, manager) should be alerted immediately?

5. Documentation

As you complete each step, take notes in the spaces below (or on a separate sheet).

Record any actions you need to take or recommendations you might make to the person in charge.

Results

Physical Observations

- Entrances/Exits Found:
- Emergency Equipment (extinguishers, alarms, etc.):
- Potential Hazards (e.g., trip hazards, blocked exits):
- Security Vulnerabilities:

Leadership & Authority

- Name/Role of the Individual in Charge:
- How to Contact Them (phone, email, etc.):
- Is there a building safety plan or manual available?:

Fire Scenario

- Most Important Evacuation Routes:
- Communication Plan (who do you alert first?):
- Equipment Used (e.g., extinguisher location):
- Personal Leadership Actions:

Gun-Wielding Threat Scenario

- Potential Hiding or Barricade Spots:
- Safest Exit (if evacuation is possible):
- Who to Contact Immediately:
- Personal Leadership Actions:

Reflection Questions

1. After doing the walkthrough, how have your views on leadership responsibility changed regarding safety and security?
2. Did you discover any equipment or procedures you weren't aware of before? How might these resources be improved?

3. In a real emergency, how would you prioritize your communication and decision-making steps?
4. What gaps in safety or security did you identify, and what actions could you or the person in charge take to address them?
5. How does conducting a safety walkthrough empower you as a potential leader to influence a safer environment for others?

Completion

Once your walkthrough and reflections are complete, review your notes and share key findings with your instructor or relevant building authority. This exercise is meant to increase your awareness as a leader and encourage proactive safety behaviors in any setting you inhabit.

COMPETENCY CHECK: CREATING A CONTINGENCY PLAN

Overview

This activity helps you develop your safety leadership skills by creating a personal contingency plan in the event of an environmental disaster. You will investigate your hometown's disaster management plan, assess its adequacy, and build your own plan for how you would respond to a disaster scenario.

Instructions

1. Research Your Hometown's Disaster Management Plan

Find official resources (city website, emergency services, etc.) outlining how your hometown or city responds to environmental disasters such as hurricanes, wildfires, tornadoes, floods, or earthquakes.

- Does your hometown even have a plan?
- What agencies are involved?
- What emergency services are provided?
- Where are the designated shelters or evacuation routes?
- How are citizens informed and warned?
- Are there resources for vulnerable populations (elderly, disabled, etc.)?

2. Evaluate the Plan's Adequacy

Analyze the plan's strengths and weaknesses:

- Are there clear steps for different disaster types?
- Are evacuation plans realistic?

- Is there coordination across agencies?
- Is the public properly educated?
- What could go wrong?
- What would you improve or recommend changing?

3. Create Your Personal Contingency Plan

Now create your own plan for what you would do in the event of a disaster:

- Where would you go?
- How would you get there?
- Who would you contact?
- What supplies would you need?
- Who depends on you (family, pets, roommates)?
- Do you know your local emergency contacts?
- How would you get updates or alerts?
- What would you do if communication systems go down?

Disaster Management Plan for My Hometown

1. What type(s) of environmental disasters is your town most at risk for?
2. What emergency procedures or agencies are in place?
3. Are there any public shelters or designated safe zones?
4. How are citizens warned (e.g., sirens, texts, apps)?
5. Does the plan cover all populations, including vulnerable groups?
6. What are the strengths of the current plan?
7. What are its weaknesses?
8. What would you improve or recommend changing?

My Personal Contingency Plan

My disaster risk(s):

My evacuation route(s):

Where I would go (shelter, friend's house, etc.):

People I would need to check on or bring with me:

Emergency supplies I would keep (go-bag):

My emergency contacts (names and numbers):

How I would stay informed (apps, radio, etc.):

Plan if communication systems fail:

Reflection Questions

1. What surprised you the most about your hometown's disaster preparedness?
2. Do you feel personally ready for an environmental disaster? Why or why not?
3. How does creating a contingency plan help you develop as a leader?
4. What role should leaders play in preparing others for disasters?
5. If you were in charge of disaster readiness for your community, what would be your top priority?

KEY TERMS

Stress: The psychological and physical strain that occurs when people perceive that the demands they face exceed the resources they have to cope.

Cognitive Resource Theory: Theory that argues that stress changes which leader strengths matter most: when stress is low, leaders' intelligence helps performance more, but when stress is high, leaders' experience tends to matter more.

Chronotype: A person's natural preference for when they feel most alert and productive during the day (e.g., "morning larks" vs. "night owls").

In Extremis Leadership: Leading in extreme, high-stakes situations where lives or serious well-being are (or are perceived to be) at immediate risk, and the leader's actions can directly affect survival and outcomes.

Meaning-making the process through which individuals interpret and make sense of experiences, particularly challenging or significant events, in order to understand their purpose, implications, or personal relevance.

CASE STUDY

I Will Always Love You: Dolly Parton, Crisis, Community, and Compassion

Dolly Parton grew up in the mountains of East Tennessee and built a career that became globally famous, but she kept her identity and her ambitions tied to "home" in the Smokies. Born in 1946 and raised in a large, working-class family, she has long framed her success as something that should create opportunity for the place that shaped her.[86] That belief eventually turned into a major business bet in Pigeon Forge: In 1986, she partnered with the Herschend family (Herschend Family Entertainment) and the local park was reintroduced as Dollywood.[87] Over the decades, Dollywood grew beyond rides and shows into a larger entertainment-and-hospitality ecosystem tied to the region's tourism economy, supporting jobs and visitor spending that ripple through Sevier County and nearby Gatlinburg.[88]



AFF-USA/Shutterstock

In late November 2016, that same region was hit with a crisis that tested the community's capacity to respond and recover. On November 28, extreme drought conditions and high winds contributed to a fast-moving "firestorm" that triggered evacuations, destroyed thousands of structures, and caused loss of life. Dollywood itself was threatened as the fire pushed toward Pigeon Forge, and the response quickly became about safety and containment.[89] Coverage from the period described firefighting crews working on or near park grounds and coordination to protect buildings, with reports noting Dollywood employees assisting through the night alongside responders as part of the effort to keep the blaze from advancing into the park.[90,91] As conditions worsened, associated properties made rapid operational decisions, including evacuating guests and shifting from normal hospitality routines to emergency support.



Erik Schelzig/AP Images

When the immediate danger passed, the region's needs moved from "hold the line" to the harder question of "how do people start over?" Families who lost primary residences suddenly needed cash for the basics right away: temporary housing, clothing, transportation, replacing documents, and simply keeping life stable while insurance, relief systems, and rebuilding plans slowly caught up. Parton's response emphasized speed, simplicity, and dignity. She launched the My People Fund to provide direct financial support to households whose primary homes were destroyed, aiming to get help into victims' hands without making them fight through a long, bureaucratic process.[92] The core commitment was straightforward: $1,000 per month for six months for eligible families. Distribution was organized locally through community-facing events, which made the aid feel personal and practical rather than abstract.

As donations grew, the effort expanded, with reporting later describing larger end-of-program payments made possible by fundraising momentum.[93,94] A widely covered benefit and telethon helped build that momentum, with organizers reporting more than $9 million raised to support wildfire victims and recovery.[95] In the end, the story of Dolly Parton and the response to the Gatlinburg fires stands out not because it featured a complex strategy, but because it paired competence with compassion. Parton used the organizational infrastructure and economic footprint she helped build in the Smokies to move tangible help quickly to neighbors at the moment they were most exposed.

Dolly Parton passed away in August 2026 at the age of 80. Her passing offers a reminder that one of the truest tests of leadership is what remains after the leader is gone. In Parton's case, that legacy can be seen not only in her music, but in the institutions she built, the opportunities she created, and the communities that are stronger because she chose to invest in them.

Case Discussion Questions

1. Dolly's response emphasized direct, immediate support. In a crisis, how should leaders balance speed with accountability and fairness so help moves quickly without creating perceptions of favoritism or misuse?
2. What makes compassion a leadership strength rather than a public-relations tactic, and what evidence would you look for to judge whether a leader's compassion is genuine?

3. Dolly used her personal brand and public visibility to mobilize resources. When does "celebrity leadership" help a community recover, and when can it unintentionally distort priorities or crowd out local voices?
4. Consider the decision to provide cash-like support rather than only goods or services. What are the risks and benefits of that approach, and how might those trade-offs change depending on the type of disaster?
5. In a community where a major employer or attraction supports local livelihoods, should protecting that institution be treated as a crisis priority alongside protecting homes and lives? Why or why not?
6. How should leaders communicate uncertainty during fast-moving crises so they remain credible without sounding helpless or overly confident?
7. Dolly's efforts became a model people still talk about years later. What are the elements of crisis leadership that make an action "memorable" in a constructive way, and why does that matter for long-term recovery?

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