Crunch Time : When Leadership Matters Most

Michael D. Cook

Grand Canyon University, Phoenix AZ, USA

M. Kenneth Holt

Austin Peay State University, Clarksville TN, US

Abstract

Leadership has been the focus of many academic papers and research studies. While there have been countless studies covering leadership style, traits of successful leaders, and theories of leadership, less attention has been paid to specific times or situations which call for more leadership than others. This paper will address three situations in which leadership tends to matter the most: crisis, change, and uncertainty. Specifically, this paper will focus on reasons why leadership is most critical at these times, traits and characteristics of leaders who are most successful in such situations, and unique opportunities that exemplary leadership can uncover during such times. *The remainder of this paper will discuss these situations in detail, explaining why each circumstance demands high quality leadership, as well as the specific traits and characteristics that leaders must possess in order to best serve their constituents during these times.*
Key Words : *Crunch Time, Leadership, Organisation, Uncertainty.*

1. INTRODUCTION

There are many times when leadership matters. When quarterly profits are less than projected and investors begin considering their options, corporate leadership must persuade them to stick with the company for the long haul. When a highly-favored football team loses to a less-skilled opponent, the coach must step in and help his team regain their confidence and prowess. Leadership matters on many levels, ranging from high-stakes corporate results to the gridiron. However, there are times when leadership matters even more.

Consider a father and sole income earner who must tell his family that he lost his job. Despite a very difficult road ahead, his ability to encourage and support his family emotionally while seeking new employment will prove vital during an extremely difficult time. After a tornado strikes and a town is left in ruins, government leaders will scramble to help those who have nothing replace basic necessities as soon as possible, and begin to build their lives again. In both of these situations, people's very lives depend on the competence and courage of their leaders.

When stakes are highest, leadership matters the most. We look to our leaders to pull us through the toughest of situations, and expect them to know what to do when we don't know where to start. Three of the most difficult situations which people face include times of crisis, change, and uncertainty. Yet, these are the situations in which leaders are depended on the most. Leaders carry a heaven burden in that they must make decisions that affect their constituents in ways they may not yet even realize. Their choices may have long lasting consequences, yet they weren't assigned crystal balls when they were appointed to their positions. In times of crisis, change, and uncertainty, people need guidance, support, and direction. The remainder of this paper will discuss these situations in detail, explaining why each circumstance demands high quality leadership, as well as the specific traits and characteristics that leaders must possess in order to best serve their constituents during these times.

2.   CRISIS

When crisis strikes, there is a strong need for effective, competent leadership. In such situations, leaders face difficult choices with no easy answers, often with little time to deliberate and limited resources at their disposal. Hunter (2006) asserts that crises are "characterized by high consequence, low probability, ambiguity, and decision-making pressure" (p. 44). Organizations experiencing a crisis may find that current procedures and protocols are ineffective due to unexpected elements. This is because crisis situations are often completely new, and are potentially "so complex that there are no programmed decisions or immediate solutions to the problem" (Hunter, 2006, p. 46). In times like these, leaders are called upon to quickly assess and analyze a situation and devise a strategy to successfully pull the organization through the problem.

True crises are felt throughout the entirety of an organization, and require members from every area to work together in order to overcome difficult obstacles. Brumfield (2012) notes that some crises can potentially "dismantle the foundations and systems of [the] organizations" that they affect (p. 45). Crisis leadership is critical because so many members of an organization stand to lose if leaders are unable to find feasible, timely solutions to issues at hand. Schoenberg (2005) suggests that crisis leadership involves "a combination of four external factors (information gathering, external conscience, preparation, experience) and a wide array of personal and leadership attributes, built on a foundation of communications reinforced by authenticity and influence" (p. 2). Such expectations constitute a tall order for the average leader, which points to the need for top-notch, experienced leaders who are confident in their abilities and have a proven track record of positive results when it comes to leading during a crisis.

Brumfield (2012) adds that effective crisis leaders "must be flexible and adaptable to continually changing conditions. They must be willing to listen to others and to share their own thoughts and ideas. They must be comfortable working in high-stress situations" (p. 45). A great deal is asked of crisis leaders because the stakes in a crisis situation are high for all parties involved. Even with the best laid plans and emergency preparedness procedures, many aspects of a crisis situation will require leaders to use split-second, personal judgment in order to address critical issues as they arise. Due to this fact, Schoenberg (2005) believes that crisis leadership is "a test of the quality and character of leadership as much as it is a test of skill" (p. 2).

In order to make such decisions and maintain the organization when everything is falling down around them, leaders must be able to think clearly. Engels (2002) claims that "the most influential variable in regulating the anxiety of any work group is the presence of a clear-thinking leader", further noting that "leadership regulates the anxiety of any group – the family, a company, the nation" (as quoted by Weiss, 2002, p. 29). Clear thinking allows leaders to make the best possible decision during a crisis, as they can better assess their options without succumbing to fear or panic. However, even the most level headed leader will have difficulty regulating his or her constituents' anxiety without an existing foundation of trust. This trust allows leaders to be truthful and candid with their constituents, even if they are delivering news that is unpleasant (such as likely the case in a crisis situation). Schoenberg (2005) identifies the need for such authenticity, noting that "authentic actions are a leadership imperative in a time of crisis…[because] whatever the extent of the damage, a truly authentic leader is able to communicate the realities and possibilities in a context of complete, unwavering honesty" (p. 3-4).

Leadership during crisis situations matters even more because of the unpredictability involved. Crisis situations do not play by any rules, and require outside-the-box thinking. Nebelung (2010) believes such situations call for "radical" leadership, explaining that radical leaders have "a clear intention about [their] own decisions and actions" and "[bridge] the gap between the walk and the talk", so as "to take actions that achieve the well-being of all" (p. 50). The best crisis leaders not only model the way in this manner, but go further and challenge their constituents to push their limits as

well. Weiss (2002) stresses the need for crisis leaders who will challenge constituents to "face problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions – problems that require [them] to learn new ways" (p. 29). By doing so, leaders not only help their organizations survive the crisis at hand, but also ensure that their constituents are better prepared to face the next challenge when it arrives.

Crisis situations demand outstanding leadership in order for organizations to come through a difficult time intact, but exemplary leaders do not simply survive the challenges; they use them to take advantage of new opportunities! Brumfield (2012) notes that "with appropriate planning and preparation and recognition of potential trouble before it actually hits, crises can be used to the advantage of the organizations involved" (p. 47). If organizational leaders have fully prepared for a pending crisis, and a solid plan is in place to navigate the situation once it arrives, they can devote more of their energy and resources toward identifying advantageous opportunities that present themselves as a result. In fact, Boin& Hart (2003) reference the "crisis-reform thesis", acknowledging that some leaders "fully exploit" crises in order to support and implement desired change (p. 546). Exemplary leaders find ways to reinforce shared goals and values at every opportunity within their organizations; if a crisis provides a solid example of how a desired change would prevent reoccurrence of similar problems, members of the organization will more readily support their leaders' efforts to institute such change.

3.   CHANGE

While crises typically deal with sudden or traumatic shifts in normal operation, not every "shift" constitutes a crisis. Often, organizations attempt to implement change based on non-critical needs, usually in order to make small gains in efficiency or to address arising issues. No matter how small the change, members of an organization must make a conscious effort to complete affected tasks in a different manner than they have done so previously. When changes are more complex or involved, members of an organization require more support and instruction than they normally

do. As a result, leadership becomes more critical in times of significant change.

Because of the level of redirection and adjustment involved with change, leaders must possess and exhibit certain characteristics and traits in order to successfully lead their organizations through a time of change. Slatter (1984) notes that leadership in times of change requires "communicating a sense of direction, establishing a sense of urgency, defining responsibilities, resolving conflict, conveying enthusiasm and dedication, and giving due credit and rewarding success" (as quoted by Brooks, 1996, p. 35). Banutu-Gomez and Banutu-Gomez (2007) point to the importance of encouragement as part of change leadership, explaining that constituents "sense [their] leader's encouragement as he or she listens to them, respects them, assists in their development, and shares power with them" (p. 69). As leadership in any situation requires leaders to be cognizant of their constituents' feelings and attitudes, it is important that leaders involved in change to have emotional intelligence. Groves (2006) explains that the "potency" of leadership behaviors "depends heavily on one's ability to exercise emotional competencies" (p. 566).

Situations involving change require leaders to possess transformative leadership skills. Eisenbach, Watson, & Pillai (1999) contend that "transformative leadership behaviors go beyond transactional leadership and motivate followers to identify with the leader's vision and sacrifice their self-interest for that of the group of the organization" (p. 82). Encouraging constituents to support changes that may be difficult or result in more work than they were assigned previously is no easy task, and leaders are sure to meet with resistance. Eisenbach, Watson, and Pillai (1999) further explain that transformative leadership skills include "charisma or idealized influence (followers trust in and emotionally identify with the leader), intellectual stimulation (followers are encouraged to question their own ways of doing things), and individualized consideration (assignments are delegated to followers providing them with learning opportunities)" (p. 82). By respecting their constituents' intelligence and ideas, and providing opportunities for them to see firsthand

the benefits of a proposed change, transformative leaders are more likely to win their support.

Katz and Kahn (1966) argue that large scale change "demands invention and creativity beyond the performance of [routine] role requirements; it requires leadership of a high order" (as quoted by Brooks, 1996, p. 35). Sweeping changes on a broad scale within an organization demand that leaders possess a vision. Groves (1996) stresses the importance of vision, claiming that "visionary leaders have the ability to powerfully communicate a compelling vision that inspires followers" (p. 567). It is critical for leaders to gain their constituents' buy-in before attempting to initiate major changes within an organization. Not every member of an organization will enthusiastically rush into change, but if a leader successfully communicates his or her vision of the end result, it is much more likely that the change can be implemented without major resistance.

Before leaders can create a vision, they must have the ability to think in the long term. Visions are not realized overnight, so visionary leaders must be able to see their vision come to fruition over time. Banutu-Gomez &Banutu-Gomez (2007) claim that "in order to be effective, leaders must have a clear sense of goals in order to guide their institutions in new directions. They need the capacity to stand back from everyday activities and see the processes of change over the long term" (p. 69). Leaders best suited for managing organizational change are those who view required change with the right perspective. Members of an organization typically see a small piece of the big picture, and may only understand how changes affect their specific area of operation. Change leaders must look beyond the immediate and see the big picture, so to speak. Ahn, Adamson, &Dornbusch (2004) assert that "leadership…is perspective; it defines what the future should look like, aligns the organization with a common vision, and provides inspiration to achieve transformational goals" (p. 113).

Change leadership is not effective when leaders impose their will upon their constituents. Rather, it has everything to do with motivation, encouragement, and support. Eisenbach, Watson, &

Pillai (1999) assert that "changes do not result from 'pushes' or pressure to move away from the present situation, but instead result from being 'pulled' toward or attracted to different possibilities" (p. 81). Leaders pull their constituents toward change by providing a solid rationale for change, and then modeling the way. Exemplary change leadership involves "the alignment of an organization's internal architecture, individual actions, and collective goals in order to achieve optimal results" (Ahn, Adamson, &Dornbursch, 2004, p. 113). Leaders reinforce organizational goals by referring back to them during times of change, and by modeling behaviors that are in line with the organizational vision.

Moerschell& Lao (2012) contend that "unexpected change causes leadership to emerge in an environment constrained by time, urgency, and rapidly changing conditions" (p. 54). In this instance, change becomes a catalyst for heightened leadership activity above the normal level required for typical organizational operations. At times, required changes result in a sense of urgency that can actually legitimize the change in the minds of constituents (Brooks, 1996, p. 32). Wise leaders recognize this opportunity and take advantage of it in order to further elicit support from within the organization.

Truman &Romanelli's (1985) model of punctuated equilibrium points to the importance of strong leadership during times of sudden change. This model sees change not as a "gradual and incremental process that occurs over a long period", but rather as "a sudden and radical event, which can be represented as a spike or anomaly sandwiched between long periods of stability" (Moerschell& Lao, 2012, p. 56). If change were always gradual and unobtrusive, strong leadership wouldn't be as vital to the process. However, as change often happens quickly and without warning, it is imperative that organizations have strong, effective leadership during such times.

4.   UNCERTAINTY

While crises and sudden changes certainly demand a great deal of effective leadership, it can be especially critical in times of uncertainty as well. Waldman, Ramirez, House, &Puranam (2001) define

uncertainty as "an individual's perceived inability to understand the direction in which an environment might be changing, the potential impact of those changes on that organization, and whether or not particular responses to the environment might be successful" (p. 136). People often experience anxiety and stress when they are unsure of what the future holds. Predictability and stability are both important to individuals, as they depend on both for continued sustenance. When traditional methods of accomplishing tasks appear to be ineffective, and no one within an organization knows for certain what changes are necessary in order to restore balance, the situation calls for a strong leader who can guide his or her constituents through the period of uncertainty.

Due to the unique level of anxiety and stress during times of uncertainty, leaders who are successful in such situations typically have strong affective intelligence. Scott (2010) notes that "leaders who are supportive, charismatic, and risk taking are important to employees when there is environmental uncertainty" (p. 34). Charismatic leaders enjoy greater success during periods of uncertainty, as their constituents are typically unsure of what they should do and are more apt to readily follow someone who is confident and sure of themselves. Strong, charismatic personalities typically convey confidence, which is usually lacking in most instances of uncertainty. Waldman, Ramirez, House, &Puranam (2001) explain that "uncertainty is stressful to followers, [which] makes organizations more receptive to charismatic effects, and allows leaders more latitude for discretion" (p. 136).

While those experiencing uncertainty may not realize it due to the immediate stress of the situation, uncertainty can be a good thing. Exemplary leaders work toward creating organizations that embrace uncertainty, rather than suppressing it (Clampitt, Dekoch, & Williams, 2002, p. 57). In fact, Clampitt, Dekoch, & Williams (2002) explain that "exploring increases uncertainty, as the company reaches out for new possibilities" (p. 57). In such a case, uncertainty is the natural consequence of experimenting with new methods and trying out new ideas. Without experimentation, there would be no innovation, which

is a key ingredient to a successful, growing organization.

Leaders can help alleviate constituents' anxiety with regard to uncertainty by attempting to reframe the situation. Kaye &McDargh (2009) state that "any event can be reframed by literally stating an opposite way of viewing the situation. This is not to deny the reality of hard emotional facts, but rather to create positive expectations" (p. 57). Reframing a situation involves looking at it from multiple points of view, and attempting to see the situation in the most positive light possible. According to Clampitt, Dekoch, & Williams (2002), "when leaders frame uncertainty consistently, they create a viewpoint that implicitly focuses employee energy, helping them make sense of the chaos and confusion" (p. 59).

Uncertainty requires a great deal of strong leadership because traditional methods of operation may not be effective going forward. Grant (1999) asserts that "under conditions of uncertainty, organizations cannot operate according to long-established rules and procedures. Effectiveness [during uncertainty] requires flexibility, responsiveness, and the continuous generation of innovation" (p. 32). Leaders must coordinate organizational efforts to respond appropriately to the unknown, encourage members of the organization to be flexible and patient, and seek new possibilities that may be applied to resolve a pending issue or problem. Also important during uncertainty is whether a leader involves others within the organization while attempting to find clarity amidst chaos. Kaye &McDaugh (2009) suggest that "while the decision ultimately lands on the senior leader's desk, involving as many parts of the organization as possible sends a clear message that 'we are in this together'" (p. 56). Involving others in the decision making process during uncertain times allows leaders to unify the organization, in addition to potentially finding new solutions based on others' ideas.

Another advantage to involving as many members of an organization as possible during uncertain times is that it sends a clear and consistent message regarding the situation. When leaders close themselves off from the organization and limit the amount of information they share, it forces their constituents to

make assumptions that may be inaccurate or even damaging. Even if leaders haven't fully come to a decision, their mere presence in the midst of their constituents can be helpful. Kaye &McDargh (2009) note that "less time with managers leaves more time for the grapevine to work overtime" (p. 56). Aside from preventing rumors from starting, leaders who work shoulder to shoulder with their followers during uncertain times reinforce the need for unity of purpose and commitment to finding a workable solution. Focusing on the problem at hand proves more beneficial to its eventual solution than allowing minds to wander freely about worst case scenarios.

Sweetman (2001) asserts that "in a world where nothing in certain but change, the manager who will succeed in leading people through the confusion is the one who can first admit to not knowing everything and then tap the resources in everyone else. It will require a kind of vulnerability combined with confidence" (p. 9). This points again to the need for authenticity in leadership, something that leaders in uncertain situations must possess in order to be effective. If leaders knew all the answers, there would not be uncertainty. However, the very fact that situations of uncertainty arise reinforces the fact that sometimes leaders do not know the answers. Sweetman (2001) adds that "research suggests that when companies fail to recognize the importance of uncertainty, employees disengage from the organization's efforts. Leaders who get the best results combine an ability to set inspiring goals and a willingness to admit that they don't know exactly how to accomplish those goals" (p. 8). A leader who simply admits to being unsure what to do is not the solution for an organization in the midst of uncertainty. This admission must be coupled with the ability to inspire members of the organization and motivate them to take ownership of the situation as well. Leaders must be the catalyst for idea generation, and take the lead role in narrowing down those ideas into feasible action steps. This reflects the combination of vulnerability and confidence that Sweetman (2001) mentioned above.

5.   CONCLUSION

Leadership is vital to organizational well-being. Without strong, effective leadership, organizational goals are less likely to be accomplished, especially when the dynamic changes due to outside influence. While leadership always matters, it matters even more in times of crisis, sudden change, and uncertainty, as these are situations in which normal operations are interrupted. Leaders who are successful in these situations are typically authentic, emotionally intelligent, and inclusive, as leadership is always more effective when performed through established relationships with constituents. In each of these three situations, successful leaders are clear-thinking, flexible, and personally lead efforts to discover creative methods for addressing atypical situations. Situations involving a crisis, change, or uncertainty also require leaders to be honest about the situation with their constituents, frame the situation appropriately, and look for opportunities that may arise as a result of the situation at hand. It's clear than when situations become the most difficult to handle, the best leaders are called upon to guide their organizations safely through.

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