Leading in Crisis

Illustrations by Elaine Vitikaien and Seminar instruction by Rick James at SMC's seminar "Leadership in times of crisis", December 2020.

Imagine you are going for a hike in the mountains with your organisation. All is going fine as you start climbing a mountain. As you get near the top, all of a sudden the wind gets up, the sky darkens, it starts snowing. Before you know it, you are caught in a blizzard that no-one forecasted. The blizzard is 'unprecedented', like nothing you have ever experienced before. 2020 feels a bit like that to me. It is like we have been caught in a COVID-19 blizzard at the top of a mountain.

2020 has been unbelievably cold and difficult. It has been much harder for some countries than others. Perhaps Sweden has fared better than most. But we all know many casualties on so many levels, whether medical, mental health, economic...

Fear has been a massive part of the pandemic, at times fuelled by the media and politicians for their own ends. Fear can obviously be a help in short-term survival, but it distorts our thinking into a narrow tunnel of self-protection. It shortens our time frame from long-term vision to the immediate issues. It is like in the midst of this snowstorm, our visibility has been reduced to a metre or two in front of us. Fear, if unchecked, can cloud our judgement and fuel self-serving behaviour.

This image of being at the top of a mountain, reminded me of the Mountain model of change, which I often use when facilitating change. This model talks about needing to reach this difficult summit in order to change. As we think about leading our organisations in this crisis, it may help to look at the three key elements at the summit of change:

- Facing the truth
- Letting go
- Receiving hope

Facing the truth

One of the most uncomfortable truths is that COVID-19 may be more than just a blizzard. It may not be simply a question of waiting it out and waiting for things to return to normal in 2021. It could be more accurate to think of it like the beginning of winter or even an ice age. If you think how 9/11 changed the world… The economic and social impacts of COVID will be with us for years. The world is never going to be the same again.

To lead in crisis requires us to help our organisations face some cold, harsh, truths about the world and our effectiveness. We have come to see ourselves through our marketing materials!

- Perhaps if we are being brutally honest, were things pre-COVID really as transformational as we hoped? Were we really seeing all the global changes in poverty, justice, conflict that our organisations' visions aspired towards?
- And if the world is really going to be different, what are the implications for how we work? We cannot expect 'business as usual' from 2019 to work in 2025.

Letting go

Over the past few months, I imagine many of you will have had to let go of so many things. We've obviously had to let go of travel; the camaraderie of being in the office; or fellowship of church; for some it's the loss of income, for others their jobs and livelihoods. We have probably seen the demise of some initiatives we hoped to launch, the loss of some projects and the ending of partnerships too. Fundamentally we've had to let go our assumptions about how the world will be and even our place in that.

As leaders we have probably had to make some really tough decisions, that affect the lives of people we know and care for. There may be long-term gains through some of this pruning, but we should not underestimate the emotional cost. At this time on top of the mountain, our role as leaders is to help people let go of past ways, deal with difficult deaths; being there with people who are grieving. Our role may even be to lead lament.

Receiving hope

But the summit of change is also the place where we receive hope. The new environment is so radically different, it may force us to take the risk and finally operate in ways we have only talked about, perhaps for years. In the midst of this crisis, being adaptive and agile is no longer just nice management-speak, but becomes essential for our very survival.

Hopefully:

- we'll finally take seriously that our normal project-approach to change is not sustainable and we need to engage wholeheartedly with more radical church and community mobilisation for example.
- Rather than investing in new technology a bit reluctantly, a couple of years late, we can get ahead of the wave.
- Instead of talking about joint ventures and alliances (even with potential competitors) we'll genuinely become more collaborative…
- When so much is uncertain, we need to experiment, quickly learn and adapt. It may feel a bit like being a start-up again. It's time to connect with our God-given creativity.

Do people trust the mountain guide?

For leaders to be effective in crisis, to help people navigate the dangers and fears at the top of the mountain, it comes down to trust. Trust is almost the only currency you have as a leader. With so much uncertain in the future, people will not follow fixed plans. They follow people. And with emotions heightened during crisis, your team and your stakeholders will be watching you even more closely than before. Everything you do and don't do will be intensified. So much of your effectiveness over the last nine months will have depended on the trust you had already earned before. But there is still much you can do to earn or lose trust at this time.

We know from research that trust grows out of three elements – how people perceive our:

1. Competence
2. Benevolence
3. Integrity

So here are some tips for leading well in a crisis. We have to show ourselves to be:

Competent

- Looking for evidence, data, not just opinion. We need to be of sound mind and sober judgement, especially when emotions so heightened. It's about bringing perspective to counter the tunnelling effect of fear and the shortening of time horizons. We may need to find some quiet space to silence the deafening noises of the storm we're in.
- Looking to the wisdom of the group, not just what one person thinks
- Decisive, not paralysed by emotion
- Rallying cry

Benevolent – on our side

- Listen
- Check in and lean into people's messy realities. Open yourself up to sitting with others pain and resisting the temptation to try and fix

<u>Integrity</u>
- Be exceedingly human. Selective vulnerability.
- Admit not knowing, Ask for help.
- Seek support – we cannot make it alone!

It comes down to you as a person
Leaders are communicating all the time, and in crisis at high volume.
- What message are you giving out?
- Do you radiate peace or panic?

The only way to break the spiral of fear and anxiety endemic in our organisations at the moment is the introduction of a 'non-anxious' presence. That is your role today. Management Consultants Bain and Co asked the question 'What makes a leader inspiring?' they concluded: "one trait matters more than any other. It is centredness: the ability to remain calm under pressure, empathise, listen deeply and remain present".

Group discussion

We'll now go into small group to share with each other how 2020 has been for you? What have been some of the frustrations? Hurts? Most difficult moments? And also what have been some of the joys? What have you managed to do as a leader this year?

<u>One thing to listen to</u>
https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/part-4-ten-commandments-for-the-long-haul/id84246334?i=1000495213303

<u>Two things to read</u>
https://journal.praxislabs.org/leading-beyond-the-blizzard-why-every-organization-is-now-a-startup-b7f32fb278ff
https://leadbysoul.com/crisis/in-search-of-stable-ground-leadership-in-a-time-of-crisis/

<u>Three things to watch</u>
Three talks on Ecclesiastes by Tim Mackie of the Bible Project. First one is:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=SRHevel&v=a0wWB8YEDiA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAbpygDZcwc
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-X1MxFLqnjg

Leadership in a time of Crisis

By Jonathan Wilson
leadership by soul

Visualised by
Elaine Vitikainen

HOW TO LEAD EFFECTIVELY

1. Improve STABILITY
   - as a leader
   - of your organisation

2. AGILITY - a stable core

3. Re-assess your drive and reinvent better future - INNOVATION

4. COLLABORATION
Build high levels of TRUST and implement best teamwork practices

THIS IS THE TIME TO:

- Take care of each other

- Reflect back - decide what to leave behind

- Discern the wisdom to carry forward

- Decide the new future to work towards