



CHAOS TO TEAMWORK:

A LEADER'S
ROLE IN CRISIS

Resilient 
ORGANISATIONS
A collaboration between research & industry

A short guide to help prepare
a crisis leadership team
before an event and improve
effectiveness during an event



Crises, whether big or small are often an unavoidable part of organisational life.

Crises test the limits of our mental and physical capacities and often require a new way of interacting, managing and leading to ensure we not only survive but also thrive.

**THIS BOOKLET PROVIDES
GUIDANCE ON HOW TO:
PREPARE A CRISIS LEADERSHIP
TEAM BEFORE AN EVENT
AND IMPROVE YOUR TEAM'S
EFFECTIVENESS DURING A CRISIS.**

No two crises or organisations are the same

BUT

Reading, thinking and discussing the issues:

BEFORE a crisis hits enables you and your team to be better prepared for the uncertain, complex and novel situations you may face.

Also consider using this resource to:

- Review your existing approaches, structures and support systems
- Generate ideas to use in exercises
- Review performance post-incident



Give your team a head start

● Issue

There are often signals that a potential threat or problem is developing. Even weak signals can be detected, but are often missed or misinterpreted. When these signals are detected, often the right people are not informed or the importance of that information is not realised.

● Solution

Establish a Rapid Reflection Force.

This force is made up of individuals who can:

- Frame, anticipate, and clarify the nature of a source of risk
- Understand holistically the possible consequences
- Accept uncertainty
- Make recommendations on action

Any member of the force should be able to make a call to action at the detection of a weak signal.

ENSURE team members come from diverse backgrounds, and are well networked.

..... **“The beginning is the most important part of the work”**

– PLATO



Launch and coach your team for success

● Issue

Your crisis leadership team needs to work effectively together but research shows there are many mistakes that inhibit group effectiveness.

● Solution

- Introduce new team members by the skill and knowledge they bring – not their role or place in the hierarchy. Research shows the way new people are introduced into a team significantly affects a team's effectiveness.
- Allow time to settle into the team setting – set some quick tasks when the team first assembles – before any broader strategy discussion.
- Consider tabards or vests denoting membership and roles within a team – research shows this generates a release of oxytocin which helps strengthen unity of purpose and team cohesion.
- Explicitly create a culture of challenging and justifying ideas.

“A title does not justify an action nor reveal the worth of a man”

– JORDAN MOUSA



Reflecting during the crisis

● Review

- Is what we are doing working?
- What have we done that was not successful?
- What do we want to achieve in the next half of our leadership shift?
- What shall we do differently?

ENSURE this review covers process as well as operations.

“Having all the answers is less important than knowing what to ask”

– R KAPLAN



Avoiding tunnel vision

● Issue

When looking at a scene, we often focus on the issues we think are most important instead of the crisis context as a whole.

This selective perception limits our ability to remain open and to see things clearly.

We look and listen for what we expect – not necessarily what is.

● Solution

Use techniques that encourage you to see beyond the immediate trigger event – open the team's vision to the scope and scale of the event.

Suggested techniques include:

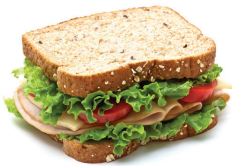
- Ensuring diversity in the team incl. gender, skills, background
- Giving the team time to process unexpected information
- Ensuring the detail is confirmed and information is shared
- Demanding questions to confirm what is known, not known and needed to be known
- Ensuring changed information is brought to people's attention

Improve brain power

● Issue

Managing uncertainty and large volumes of information and decision making places huge demands on the brain's processing capacity.

● Solution



..... **EAT** **DRINK** **REST**

ENSURE your leadership team has sufficient capacity to enable stand down periods.

MONITOR to ensure all team members are having sufficient food, fluids and rest.

Five consecutive nights of reduced sleep produces the cognitive performance of 48 hours without sleep.



Improve team interaction

● Issue

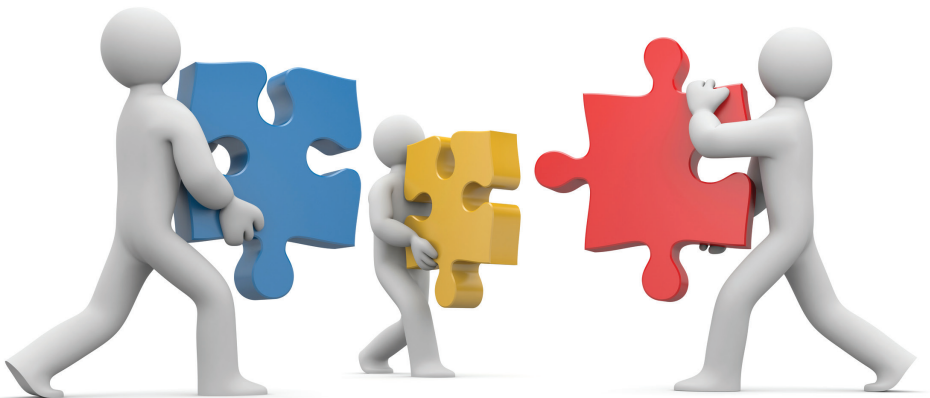
Effective crisis leadership teams need to:

- Understand each other's knowledge and experience
- Be comfortable questioning ideas and directions (no matter who is giving them)
- Know how to utilise each other's capabilities and expertise

● Solution

- Establish crisis leadership teams in advance.
- Give the team as many opportunities as possible to work together before a crisis.
- Consider conventional team building exercises as well as disaster exercises.

Research shows airline incidents are significantly more likely on the first day a crew flies together



Improve decision-making

● Issue

The brain seeks out information to confirm that an idea it has is right. This is called confirmation bias and may mean that we ignore information that contradicts our interpretation of an event or a potential situation.

● Solution

Similarly to tunnel vision, creating a diverse team will help.

Diversity includes backgrounds, business units, age, gender and thinking styles. Ensure that diversity of opinion is enabled by a team culture of questioning and explaining.

Also; ASK

What don't we know that would help with this decision?

Why might this solution fail?



..... **“In a group, stupidity condenses”**

– FINNISH PROVERB

Improve innovation and idea generation

● Issue

Adverse events are often a time when people both need and are more receptive to change and innovation.

Creating innovative thought requires significant brain capacity, which can be difficult to achieve in the busy and demanding crisis environment.

● Solution

Our brain thrives on habits. Habits make many parts of our day routine allowing the brain to conserve energy. The less energy consumed to undertake routine events, the more is available for innovation, which requires greater energy.

Create sufficient structure and process (and enable practice), so that the core tasks of the crisis leadership team become routine.

Separate some staff from the intensity of the ongoing operations to allow greater innovation.

“I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been”

– WAYNE GRETZKY,
CANADIAN HOCKEY STAR



This guide was developed by Resilient Organisations – a public good research programme based in New Zealand. We have been researching what makes organisations resilient to crises since 2004.

Resilient Organisations is a collaboration between top New Zealand research universities, particularly the University of Canterbury and University of Auckland. We are funded by the Natural Hazards Platform and supported by a diverse group of industry partners and advisors. We are a multi-disciplinary team of over 20 researchers, representing a synthesis of engineering, science and business leadership aimed at transforming organisations into those that both survive major events and thrive in the aftermath.

See **www.resorgs.org.nz** for further information

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