



# **Crisis Leadership: The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make in a Crisis and How to Avoid Them**

EXECUTIVE WHITE PAPER





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Employee shooting! Chemical spill! Product recall! Cyber-technology attack! Executive kidnapping! Natural disaster! Plant bombing! Terrorist attack!

Once reserved within the imagination of a Hollywood screenwriter or suspense novelist, these kinds of crises now dominate our daily news headlines. Whether around the corner or around the world, these crisis scenarios are now far too common within our increasingly complex, stressful and dangerous world.

Surveys show that more and more of these frightening scenarios frequently weigh on the forefront of a leader's mind. Leaders from all sectors of life realize that if they are not currently leading through a crisis, they soon will be.

So how do leaders prepare themselves and their teams to face a crisis and win? What are the leadership competencies essential to successfully assessing risk and navigating through an actual crisis?

Rather than begin with a list of the core competencies necessary for crisis leadership, let's first look at the ten biggest mistakes leaders typically make during a crisis. Then, based upon these critical sometimes life-threatening mistakes, I'll share the three key competencies for effective risk assessment and crisis leadership.

Based upon extensive research and a collaborative effort with crisis management experts from the Secret Service, military, CIA, and FBI, here is a list of the top ten mistakes leaders often make in a crisis.

## Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make in a Crisis

### Mistake #1: Failure to plan.

General Dwight Eisenhower, the man behind the brilliant D-Day invasion plan that initiated the Allied victory in World War II, once said, "A plan is nothing; planning is everything." The most frightening and common mistake leaders make is to have no

plan or template to follow before, during, or even after a crisis occurs. They are unnecessarily caught off guard by an unexpected and potentially fatal event with no structure or action plans to follow. Through their lack of foresight (risk assessment) and proper pre-crisis planning (crisis drills), leaders will simply react to a crisis by applying knee-jerk, shoot-from-the-hip solutions.

During a crisis, a leader must align three critical strategic elements: the Goals, the People, and the Resources. The goals define the "What" - that is, the specific outcomes and objectives of the crisis intervention. The people define the "Who" - getting the right people in the right positions with the right teams.

“ Without such a solid, strategic alignment between the goals, people, and resources, crisis leadership interventions are at best futile and at worst disastrous. ”

*Bill Sedlacek - former President BF Goodrich*

The resources define the "How" that the leaders will use as they apply all the various tangible and intangible resources available to them to meet the goals. Without such a solid, strategic alignment between the goals, people, and resources, crisis leadership interventions are at best futile and at worst disastrous.



## Mistake #2: Failure to determine & follow a hierarchy.

One of the most critical aspects of successful crisis navigation is to determine and follow a proper hierarchy of executive and field leadership. Great crisis plans can quickly crumble through breakdowns in what under normal circumstances would be an effective change of command. Even leaders with a pre-set crisis action template often fail to align the goals, people, and resources necessary to win during the crisis. When the stress and pressure of a crisis hits, something as simple as a basic “Call Down List” of who to call, what is their responsibility and how to reach them (cell number, email, text) is critically important during a crisis.



Additionally, leaders must effectively handle the “clashing egos” that so quickly appear during a crisis. Known to crisis leadership experts as the “Alexander Haig Syndrome”, a well-meaning person who improperly assumes control often does far more damage than good. Such confusion can be eliminated with a well thought-out and communicated crisis hierarchy of command that is discussed and clearly understood before a crisis occurs.

## Mistake #3: Failure to be visible, present and attentive.

A leader can only be in one place at one time. Yet leaders who hide or appear removed from the crisis negate their perceived and expected leadership actions. Visibility must be delivered during and after the crisis in four areas: colleagues (crisis team and employees), customers, constituents (vendors, stockholders, suppliers), and communities (cities served, local and national media).

Remember how Mayor Rudy Giuliani acted during and then lead the chaotic days after the 9/11 terrorist attack? His multiple daily media appearances along with his hands-on approach in face-to-face meetings with many departments

gave all New Yorkers (and the world) the necessary calm we all needed in seeing a visible leader at the helm.

## Mistake #4: Failure to listen & comprehend.

A vital skill leaders must leverage during crisis is comprehensive listening. They must set aside their egos and be willing to listen to all parties involved. Only through powerful listening can a leader build the right environment of openness, trust, and professionalism necessary to navigate everyone through the crisis. Even the simple act of taking notes (or even assigning a full-time scribe) is an invaluable listening tool that helps a leader assemble and digest the potentially powerful ideas of all involved.

## Mistake #5: Failure to effectively communicate.

Communication equipment failures do commonly occur during crisis (fire department inside Twin Towers at 911, power & cell lines knocked down during Hurricane Katrina). Properly functioning communication equipment (telephones, cell phones, two-ways, Internet, text, email, etc.) is absolutely essential to leading a crisis. Yet the most critical crisis communication breakdowns can be avoided if these risks are assessed and contingency plans put in place before the crisis hits.

The majority of communication failures during a crisis are electronic equipment failures, although human communication failures are all too frequent during a crisis. Unclear goals, misunderstood instructions, poor delegation, incomplete feedback systems - lack of decision-making - these are the core communication failures within most crisis situations. Leaders must therefore continually focus on crafting and sending clear, unambiguous communications with minimal error for misinterpretation by their supervisors, peers, subordinates, customers, community, or the media. Specific, concise, and action-focused language is essential to effectively connect with everyone impacted by the crisis.





## Mistake #6: Failure to try new things.

The very nature of a crisis mandates leaders be open and willing to change fast, to embrace new ways on the fly and problem solving techniques never before imagined, and to do so without projecting fear. Yet far too often when in the midst of crisis, well meaning leaders over rely on the 'ways of yesterday' and let fear distract, or worse, control them. In the end, they fail to objectively find new ways to better respond to today's immediate crises.

Leaders must therefore be adept in when and how (1) to innovate current encumbering systems, (2) create new and more flexible systems, and (3) effectively use their intuition. Through an understanding of the interconnected roles of innovation, creativity, and intuition in a crisis, leaders are much better prepared to implement the best actions for today's crisis environment.



## Mistake #7: Failure to give up control.

It is only natural for leaders to assume control over a crisis, and in fact, they should. The problem is when a leader refuses to give up enough control necessary to effectively negate the crisis. The well documented failure of the then Governor of Louisiana to allow the federal government quick access and control over the response efforts after Hurricane Katrina led to much higher levels of destruction and damage than was necessary.

In times of crisis, leaders must create an environment that moves beyond delegation (do what I tell you to do) to emancipation (giving people the freedom to succeed). Proper delegation of the crisis plan and flexibility to adjust as circumstances rapidly change is essential to success.

## Mistake #8: Failure to act.

Hesitancy is a powerful enemy of progress. Inappropriate indecision kills a response teams' enthusiasm, motivation,

and commitment to succeed. Leaders must therefore have the confidence to make the call - to pull the trigger - and do something. People want their leaders to show confidence even when they're not 100% sure the leader's decision is the right thing to do.

Such a call to action requires real courage, the willingness to act upon your convictions. With a solid plan, surrounded by a well-trained crisis team, leaders are far more likely to take the right action at the right time for the right reasons - to be truly courageous in the face of tragedy.

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“Lead the crisis - or the crisis will lead you!”  
*Arthur J. Lichte - 4 Star Air Force General - retired*

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## Mistake #9: Failure to lead.

A crisis demands leadership – real leadership. No one can perfectly “manage” a crisis - there's simply too many variables. Only through real leadership (making tough choices, facing opposition, under extreme pressure) does a company, a community, or a nation survive.

Failure to lead during a crisis is not just a failure - it's a tragedy. Those in charge must lead the crisis - or the crisis will lead them!

## Mistake #10: Failure to debrief.

Most people just want to get through a crisis and forget about it. After cleaning up a semi-tractor trailer full of trash, tree limbs, and other debris the days following Hurricane Ivan, I remember well desperately wanting to get back my phone lines, my internet connection, the power back on to my refrigerator, air conditioning and lights, and just put it all behind me!

But ask anyone - from a firefighter, to a navy seal, to a fighter jet pilot - and they will unanimously agree that one of the most powerful learning devices they integrate into their professional lives is a post-event analysis often call a “Debrief Session.”

A “Debrief Session” is a focused, well-structured, and comprehensive analysis that includes such areas as the efficacy of the original goals and objectives, actions taken, leadership decisions and adjustments made, successes and failures, and perhaps most important, lessons learned to apply into the future. Though a systematic debriefing process, leaders develop themselves and their entire organizations to be better prepared for the next crisis they face.

## Three Essential Crisis Leadership Competencies

In the end, your leadership legacy may ultimately be judged by how well you have prepared for and navigated your company through a crisis. Regardless of the initiatives you have introduced to increase earnings, bolster market share, raise stock prices, re-energize your brand, or innovate new products, most often you will be remembered far more for your ability to navigate through a substantial crisis than for dominating a particular market.

“ The three essential crisis leadership competencies are exactly the same ones you need for successful day-to-day corporate leadership. ”  
*Terry Culhane - Deputy Chief NY City MTA PD*

Yet, it is reassuring to know that the three essential competencies for crisis leadership are exactly the same three skills you need for successful day-to-day corporate leadership. It is also reassuring to know that these three competencies can be learned, honed, and elevated within any leader's current skill set.

The three essential crisis leadership competencies are the ability to:

- (1) **Envision** - to lead from strategy
- (2) **Engage** - to lead through people
- (3) **Execute** - to lead for transformational results.

A leader needs all three to be highly effective. They particularly need all three when leading through a crisis. When entire leadership teams are properly trained and equipped with these essentials, they are prepared to face any crisis with high confidence, competence, and commitment.

It therefore behooves any forward-thinking leadership team to take their collective crisis leadership skills to a higher level NOW before your next major crisis hits. Assess your risks, prepare for crisis now. Waiting for a better time, or when your “schedule frees up” may simply be too late.

For tomorrow, you may actually wake up, forced to face your next crisis.

Are you ready?

“ Crisis Leaders must emphasize advance planning, coordinated efforts, and effective response to successfully mitigate any crisis. ”  
*Michael (Mike) A. Goehring - Senior Special Agent, US Secret Service - retired*





## ABOUT THE TALON CHALLENGE

The TALON Challenge is a 2.5 day crisis scenario-based executive learning experience, co-led by former Secret Service, Homeland Security, FBI, and military crisis subject matter experts. Via real-time crisis simulations played out in realistic, high-pressure scenarios, executive leadership teams hone their collective skills in how to effectively lead within a crisis. Through a strategic alliance with The Ropella Group, an international executive search, consulting and leadership transformation firm, Dr. Jim brings the Talon Challenge to top corporate retreat sites and destination resorts across the country. [Contact us](#) for more details.



## ABOUT MIKE GOEHRING

Michael A. (Mike) Goehring served as a Special Agent of the United States Secret Service for 21 years, with assignments in the Pittsburgh and Philadelphia Field Offices, the U.S. Secret Service Training Academy in Washington, D.C., and the Vice Presidential Protective Division in Washington, D.C. Mike's many and varied assignments included protection of five U.S. Presidents. Mike served as a Protective Detail Supervisor for Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates and nominees, various heads of state, world leader and papal visits. After leaving the U.S. Secret Service, Mike served as an Inspector General Supervisory Agent for the United States Railroad Retirement Board. He also held a faculty position at Pensacola Christian College, teaching and developing criminal justice and psychology courses.



## ABOUT DR. JIM

Dr. Jim Harris is founder of [To a Higher Level LLC](#), an international speaking and consulting firm dedicated to taking leaders and their teams to a higher level of success and significance. An author of eight business books published in four languages, Dr. Jim's clients include Best Buy, Walmart, IBM, Johnson & Johnson, State Farm, Wells Fargo, as well as dozens of healthcare, service companies and associations.