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Crisis Leadership

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Abstract

There is no situation where leadership is more important than during a crisis, and yet crisis leadership is a relatively underdeveloped field. This article explores what we know and what remains unknown about crisis leadership. We begin with an overview of what crises are, including different types and key dynamics of crises. We then review four leadership theories that offer insights into crisis leadership before elucidating five key competencies for crisis leadership. Three distinct avenues for future research are proposed, including exploring the distinctions and intersections of crisis leadership and crisis management, the cross-national and intercultural implications for leading through crises, and the role of ethics in leading well through crisis. Crises are increasingly frequent and complex, warranting a concerted effort to research, teach, and develop good crisis leadership.

INTRODUCTION

We tend to assume that leadership takes place under stable circumstances—leading a work organization, a governmental bureaucracy, a nonprofit, or an ongoing social movement. In fact, many of our theories of leadership conceptualize leadership under "normal" and stable conditions. However, there is likely no situation where leadership is more important than during a time of crisis. Crises put incredible strains on organizations and call for quick and decisive action. Perhaps because crises are typically conceived as sudden and unexpected events, and because many crises are quickly resolved, leadership research has paid relatively little attention to crisis leadership. For the most part, crises have been viewed from a management perspective, which advocates anticipating and preparing for different crisis scenarios, and the creation of response teams that will be activated in the event of a certain crisis. But it is impossible to anticipate and prepare for all crises. Like any organizational error, crises can be neither predicted with absolute accuracy nor eradicated entirely (Frese & Keith 2015). Unforeseen, unknowable, and truly novel crises require a distinctive leadership response that often includes being flexible and adaptable, making good decisions quickly, and mustering resources on short notice.

Over the past decades, crises such as the Fukushima nuclear plant meltdown, the Deep Horizon oil spill, Hurricane Katrina, the Challenger space shuttle disaster, and the Exxon Valdez oil spill have captivated public attention. These crises unfolded suddenly but had lasting and devastating effects on human communities and the natural environment, and they proved immensely challenging for those tasked with leading through them. Thankfully, not all managers will be tasked with leading through crises of such magnitude. But crises are increasing in frequency and complexity and new crises, such as the continued COVID-19 pandemic, confront all leaders. The global, pervasive, and enduring nature of the pandemic has affected health and safety, the economy, and social life around the world and has led to a recent flurry of research and theorizing on crisis leadership.

The increasing frequency and complexity of crises is due, at least in part, to the fact that our organizations, systems, and nations are increasingly interconnected, from multinational corporations to global supply chains, international travel, interdependent markets, and increasingly savvy consumers. Organizations and nations no longer exist in isolation and there is very little insulation from crises. Traditional crisis management research focused on planning, prevention, and containment of crises, but the increasing frequency and complexity of crises means "no organization, even with the healthiest of budgets, could plan for all possible contingencies" (Pearson & Mitroff 1993, p. 49). The impossibility of establishing plans and processes for every possible crisis is what drives the need for knowledge and expertise in crisis leadership.

There is a unique and vital role for leadership in times of crises. As Grint (2005) explains, the nature of the problem dictates the appropriate response. When a problem is critical—for example, a car crash or house fire—command is required. When a problem is complicated, but there is a known process of resolution—for example, applying a human resources (HR) process or executing plans—management is required. And, when a problem is completely novel, presents situations and variables never encountered before, and has no known answers or procedural precedence—for example, a major scandal or a global pandemic—leadership is required. Crises present ambiguous and changing stimuli that require normative power, collaboration, and asking the right questions to help organizations come together to make sense of and navigate the unknown—all of which are functions of leadership (Grint 2005). In crisis situations, especially once the initial critical response is over (for which command is often required), leadership plays a crucial role. With this review, we illustrate how crisis leadership plays a vital and distinct role in navigating organizations through the crises they will inevitably encounter.

The remainder of this article unfolds as follows. First, we review traditional and contemporary research to distill what constitutes a crisis, describe different types of crises, and identify eight key crisis dynamics. We then outline four leadership theories that offer important implications for crisis leadership before elucidating five key competencies for crisis leaders. For each key competency, we identify practical implications for leaders. We conclude with three important directions for future research.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A CRISIS?

Knowing how to lead through a crisis requires leaders to know what crises are, but establishing clear parameters around what constitutes a crisis is an elusive task. One only needs to consider the vastly different causes and consequences of crises such as the WeWork scandal (Zeitlin 2019), Canada's 2022 trucker convoy (Coletta et al. 2022), or COVID-19 to begin to see the complexity of delineating precisely what makes something a crisis or not.

The word crisis implies difficulty and danger. Crises are considered occurrences that threaten the fundamental operation or viability of an organization[1] (Hermann 1963). Crisis events are low probability (Weick 1988), meaning their occurrence is rare, which is why they tend to occur unexpectedly and infrequently. But, when crises do occur, they are high consequence, meaning they threaten the existence or fundamental operation of an organization (Hermann 1963, Weick 1988). The high consequence of crises creates time pressures, because if not addressed rapidly and prudently, the impact of crises will build and can cause the demise of the organization.

Early crisis research, based primarily in the fields of communication, public relations, and crisis management, tends to treat crises as discrete events to be prevented and contained in order to protect organizational functioning and reputation (Wooten & James 2008). Events such as security breaches or product recalls exemplify this tightly bounded notion of crises. However, as our society and organizations have developed and become more complex and interconnected, the nature of crises has evolved, as illustrated in **Table 1**.

From the earliest work, crises were conceptualized as unanticipated, time-pressured threats to organizations (Hermann 1963). Over the ensuing years, the ways crises are understood has taken some important turns. One such turn was prompted by Weick's (1988) work on sensemaking in crises. The process of sensemaking explains how raw stimuli are interpreted and affected by the decisions and actions of people (Weick 1988). This means that crises are not simply objective occurrences that happen to organizations; rather, crises are shaped by the actions of those seeking to understand and manage them, which we discuss in more detail below. Another important shift in the way crises are conceptualized was advanced by Pearson & Clair (1998), who elucidate the ambiguity of crises. It is often difficult to determine precisely what caused a crisis, to delineate the exact or complete effects of a crisis, or to determine the most appropriate response to a crisis. In short, the novelty of crises implies a lack of known process and creates a sense of unknowingness.

The public nature of crises is another important aspect to consider (James & Wooten 2005). Public attention means that leaders' actions in crisis situations are closely watched and scrutinized and that the real and perceived effects of a crisis can be widely felt. Crises also tend to be emotionally charged (James & Wooten 2005, James et al. 2011), and the emotion management of leaders in times of crises has since been identified as important research (Wu et al. 2021).

[1]Throughout this article, we indicate "organization" for brevity, but please note that by organization we imply any entity with a particular purpose, from small businesses to large multinationals, communities, and even national and international governing bodies.

Table 1 Evolving definitions of crises

Era	Definition
1960s	"An organizational crisis (1) threatens high-priority values of the organization, (2) presents a restricted amount of time in which a response can be made, and (3) is unexpected or unanticipated by the organization" (Hermann 1963, p. 64).
1970s	Crisis is "a situation in which goals are at stake that are of high importance to the system (=high valence) when the probability that these (necessary) goals will be achieved is (too) small" (Mulder et al. 1971, p. 21).
1980s	"Crises are characterized by low probability/high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals of an organization" (Weick 1988, p. 305).
1990s	Crises are "high magnitude, require immediate attention, an element of surprise, the need for taking action, and are outside the organization's [complete] control. An incident or event must pose a threat to the organization's reputation and viability to be considered a crisis" (Pearson & Mitroff 1993, p. 49). "An organizational crisis is a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly" (Pearson & Clair 1998, p. 60).
2000s	A crisis is "[a]ny emotionally charged situation that, once it becomes public, invites negative stakeholder reaction and thereby has the potential to threaten the financial wellbeing, reputation, or survival of the firm or some portion thereof" (James & Wooten 2005, p. 142).
2010s	A crisis is "a rare, significant, and public situation that creates highly undesirable outcomes for the firm and its stakeholders. . .and requires immediate corrective action by firm leaders" (James et al. 2011, p. 461, citing James & Wooten 2010, p. 17). "We define crisis as a process of weakening or degeneration that can culminate in a disruption event to the actor's (i.e., individual, organization, and/or community) normal functioning" (Williams et al. 2017, p. 739).
2020s	Crises are "events that are perceived by leaders and organizational stakeholders as unexpected, highly salient, and potentially disruptive" (Wu et al. 2021, p. 2).

Accounting for affected stakeholders and the severity of impacts, including applying sound ethical frames (Alpaslan & Mitroff 2021), represents another important shift in attempts to delineate what constitutes a crisis.

The distinction between crisis-as-event and crisis-as-process (Williams et al. 2017) makes a significant contribution to the conceptualization of crises. A crisis-as-event approach focuses on events such as accidents, sabotage, and natural disasters as the unit of analysis, and studies focus on triggers and consequences of such events (Williams et al. 2017). When we think of crises as discrete events, they are easier to categorize and can appear simpler to match with appropriate response strategies. However, crises-as-events remain unpredictable because they are seen as discrete, unexpected "things" that "happen to" an organization. Thus, the goal, from a crisis-as-event perspective, is to recover, adjust, and restore equilibrium (Williams et al. 2017). Conversely, the crisis-as-process approach recognizes that crises are not always surprising, discrete events; rather, they emerge over time. Examples of crises-as-process include things like class action discrimination cases, which emerge from ongoing mismanaging of relatively minor misconduct. The crisis-as-process perspective focuses less on a discrete event and more on the processes through which crises unfold and are navigated and shaped by actors over time (Williams et al. 2017). The crises-as-process approach accounts for the incubation of crises, which is facilitated by erroneous assumptions, complex information and stimuli, norms of inattentiveness to signals, and a reluctance to imagine worst case scenarios (Turner 1976, Williams et al. 2017). Event system theory, which illustrates how discrete events—including crisis events—impact and spur behaviors, features, and further events (Morgeson et al. 2015), helps reconcile and integrate the dual nature of crises. Put simply, crises usually involve both ongoing processes and multiple discrete events.

As illustrated in **Table 1**, evolving conceptualizations of crises have become more nuanced and reflective of the complex nature of crises. However, even modern definitions of crises retain the key elements of unexpectedness, time pressure, and impending threat.

Alpaslan & Mitroff (2021, pp. 2–3) integrate numerous definitions presented in **Table 1**, and therefore aptly summarize a current conceptualization of organizational crises:

> [C]risis is defined as 'a process of weakening or degeneration that can culminate in a disruption event to the actor's (i.e., individual, organization, and/or community) normal functioning' (Williams et al. 2017, p. [739]). This disruption event is 'a low-probability, high-impact situation that is perceived by critical stakeholders to threaten the viability of the organization' (Pearson & Clair 1998, p. 66). It is also a rare and public event that requires 'immediate corrective action' (James & Wooten 2010, p. 17; James et al. 2011).

From a leadership perspective, crises are "events that are perceived by leaders and organizational stakeholders as unexpected, highly salient, and potentially disruptive" (Wu et al. 2021, p. 2). The unexpected nature of crises has featured in definitions for decades, and has to do with the rarity, unusualness, infrequency, and unpredictability of crises, which means that leaders likely have little or no experience in managing such events or processes (Wu et al. 2021). Salience has to do with the severity of impact and the sense of urgency implied by an impending crisis. Interestingly, Wu et al. (2021) suggest that crises are only potentially disruptive. Crises have objective signals and effects, but they require subjective sensemaking and sensegiving. When leaders do not detect and make/give sense accurately and compellingly, crises are likely to become more disruptive—this notion of potential disruption helps explain why the same crisis can affect different organizations differently (Wu et al. 2021). For example, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders of some nations, such as New Zealand and Germany, took quick and decisive actions to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, while others, such as Brazil and the United States, initially refused to acknowledge the crisis, delayed responses, and applied inconsistent strategies.

Types of Crises

As indicated in the preceding section, crises are complex and hard—maybe impossible—to define precisely or delineate with exactitude. However, there have been noteworthy efforts to categorize types of crises. Early crisis typologies categorized crises by cause. Marcus & Goodman (1991) distinguished between accidents, scandals, and product safety and health incidents. By their distinction, accidents are discrete one-time, unintentional, and unfortunate events that adversely affect easily identifiable victims, for example, the Bhopal chemical leak disaster (Broughton 2005). In contrast, scandals are not discrete events, often have obscure origins and poorly represented victims, and disgrace and damage the reputations of perpetrators and often of their respective organization—for example, a bribery scandal. Product safety and health incidences involve repeated events or revelations that occur over time and can result in mass suffering, for example, the Ford Pinto saga (Marcus & Goodman 1991). Accidents, scandals, and product safety issues account for many crises, but there are clearly more causes of crises; for instance, where would a mass shooting or catastrophic earthquake fit into such a typology?

In their typology, Pearson & Mitroff (1993) also categorized crises by cause, but focused on the distinction between human-made crises and naturally occurring crises. They arranged crises along a continuum from technical/economic to human/social and suggest corresponding preventative measures. According to Pearson & Mitroff (1993), technical/economic crises consist of events such as extortion, bribery, and hostile takeovers, whereas human/social crises consist of terrorism, sexual harassment, and damaging rumors. However, it can be argued that it is impossible to separate

extortion from the individual actors and their corresponding human and social processes that lead to and enable it. Similarly, most human/social crises would entail some element of technical or economic processes in both cause and effect. We now know that binary distinction based on the causes of crises alone is an overly simplistic approach.

In an effort to differentiate types of crises more precisely, later scholars proffered typologies that specified types of crises by what actually happened, for example, "oil spills, air disasters, crowd disasters, nuclear crises, terrorism, and chemical explosions" (James et al. 2011, p. 470). While much more precise than the cumbersome and general distinction between human-made and natural, these very specific types of crises can make it hard to see what it is that makes a crisis a crisis; for example, what is it about a mine collapse and an information breach that makes both a crisis? A more elaborate attempt to classify causes of crises focuses on two intersecting continua, internal versus external and intentional versus unintentional, to produce four types of crises, accidents (unintentional and internal), transgressions (intentional and internal), faux pas (unintentional and external), and terrorism (intentional and external) (James et al. 2011, p. 471).

The integrative work of Wooten & James (2008) strikes a balance of clear distinctions yet broad enough categories to account for most crises, providing a reasonably robust typology of crises. They propose four types of crises: (*a*) accidents, which are unexpected, one-time events that usually involve victims and require a response focused on meeting the needs of those most adversely affected; (*b*) scandals, which are events or occurrences that compromise the organization's reputation; (*c*) product safety and health incidents, which could range from a faulty product to ongoing employee safety or health risks; and (*d*) employee-centered crises, which are smoldering and emerge over time, usually due to some poor HR practices resulting in inequality or unfair treatment of employees (Wooten & James 2008). To this list, we would add a fifth key type of crisis: (*e*) natural disasters, which include events and the effects of events such as major storms, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, fires, and floods, noting that sometimes these events are precipitated and influenced by human activity (e.g., arson or unsustainable diversion of water courses).

Although not exhaustive, the below list provides some common organizational crises and helps illustrate the difficulty of establishing definitive criteria to categorize crises:

- Extortion
- Bribery
- Scandal
- Corruption
- Product tampering
- Security breach
- Technology disruption
- Class action
- Consumer activism
- Boycotts
- Labor disputes
- Natural disasters
- Terrorism
- Environmental degradation (oil spills, groundwater contamination)
- Accidents

It is also important to note that these occurrences only become crises when they threaten the viability of the organization (Hermann 1963, Pearson & Clair 1998, Weick 1988), which often depends on such events being left unaddressed and becoming public. For example, if an instance

of corruption is identified and dealt with immediately within the organization before it becomes public or becomes a systemic issue, the chances of a fundamental threat to the organization's reputation or viability is minimized. However, if such instances are ignored and allowed to continue and grow, the chances of public attention and severe consequences increase exponentially. Thus, early detection and prompt action are fundamental to averting crises. Unfortunately, not all crises are easy to detect or possible to avert.

The lingering challenge with crisis typologies is to delineate categories that are precise enough to include or exclude certain crisis events, and yet broad enough to account for more than one specific type of crisis. In contrast to categorizing crises by cause, James & Wooten (2005) articulated differences based on timing and duration, namely, sudden and smoldering crises. With sudden crises, usually the organization gets some sympathy as the crisis is deemed unexpected and it is reasonable that the organization did not know it was coming and/or could not prevent it or prepare (e.g., natural disaster, random workplace violence, terrorist attack). Conversely, smoldering crises are usually perceived as the organization's own doing, caused by things the organization has done or ignored or mismanaged (e.g., ongoing workplace safety issues, product defects, and labor disputes), and therefore receive less good will from stakeholders and the public (James & Wooten 2005). Considering the timing and duration of crises brings the role of leadership into focus. A command response may suffice in the face of a sudden critical incident, but when crises stretch out through time, change shape, and convolute, those at the helm must practice leadership. They must draw on normative power, seek collaboration, and actively engage in collective sensemaking. Key competencies for crisis leadership are discussed below, but first we distill some of the key dynamics of crises, especially as related to issues of leadership.

Crisis Dynamics

The way crises are conceptualized and categorized has evolved as have the nature and effects of crises themselves, and they will continue to do so. However, it is important that crisis leaders can determine when they are facing a crisis, instead of some other unfortunate or challenging occurrence. On the basis of our review of the most influential work in the field, we suggest there are some distinguishing and common dynamics of crises that can help leaders determine when they are facing a crisis as opposed to some other disruption or challenge. These key crisis dynamics are presented in **Figure 1**.

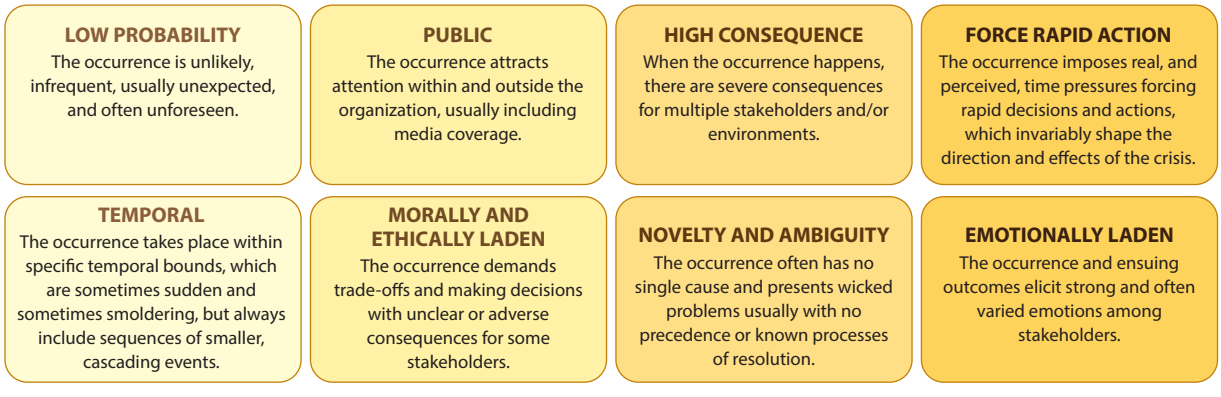

Figure 1

Crisis dynamics: elements that suggest a crisis is occurring.

THEORIES RELATED TO CRISIS LEADERSHIP

Although there have been no researched theories that directly address crisis leadership, there is theoretical work on crisis management and several leadership theories that have implications for leading in a crisis. These theories span four decades and offer very different perspectives on leadership in a crisis. In contrast to most general leadership theories (e.g., authentic leadership, servant leadership), which implicitly assume stable conditions, the following four theories deal explicitly with the dynamics that characterize crises, such as those discussed above.

Crisis Management Theory

An early theory of crisis management was proposed by sociologist Charles Perrow. Perrow (1999, 2004) argued that in the modern era we have created complex and high-risk technologies (for example, nuclear power plants and genetic engineering) that have the capacity to injure or kill many thousands or millions of people. One general rule derived from Perrow's analysis is that while centralized leadership is effective in dealing with failures in less complex systems, more complex systems, such as aircraft control systems and space exploration, require more decentralized leadership to deal with crises within the system.

Ian Mitroff (2007), who is known as the "father of crisis management," argues that the best strategy to manage a crisis is preparation. He argues that effective crisis managers anticipate and prepare for all possible disasters and adopt a mindset that bad things will likely happen. As a result, leaders need to be prepared and vigilant. This includes consulting with lower-level and frontline personnel who may be more attuned to vulnerabilities and the potential for crises. Mitroff advocates for the creation of crisis response teams, anticipating different forms of crises (e.g., defective products, financial issues, and environmental disasters) as well as the creation of a Crisis Command Center and a Chief Crisis Officer. Interestingly, many governments have numerous structures in place to manage crises. For example, the United States government had a pandemic response team and a pandemic "playbook" and even ran a simulation of a virus pandemic in early 2019—one that very much resembled the actual COVID-19 pandemic.

What lessons does crisis management theory offer leadership in times of crises? Training and rehearsal for crisis responses are essential, and fire drills and simulations of responses to catastrophic weather events are examples that have become commonplace in many organizations. However, Pearson & Mitroff (1993, p. 49), note that it is impossible to plan and prepare for every possible crisis. Meaning, planning, and preparation for all foreseeable crises should be prioritized, but unforeseen crises are inevitable and will require individual and collective leadership capacity to adapt and respond accordingly.

Cognitive Resource Theory

Fred Fiedler (1967) is best known for his contingency theory of leadership, but he also proposed a contingency model for leading under stressful and urgent circumstances that was labeled cognitive resource theory (CRT) (Fiedler & Garcia 1987). Essentially a 2-by-2 model, CRT distinguishes between leader intelligence and leader experience and stressful and nonstressful circumstances. According to this theory, under times of stress/crisis, leaders who are more experienced perform better. Under nonstressful conditions, intelligent leaders tend to perform better. The rationale is that more intelligent leaders tend to take time thinking through strategy and weighing different courses of action, whereas more experienced leaders see situations in more structured terms, rely on well-rehearsed strategies, and move more quickly to action.

Much of the research developing and supporting CRT was conducted in military settings. The theory also incorporates the followers' levels of competence as well as their support for the leader,

and offers suggestions on appropriate leader behavior/style under stressful conditions. For example, if the leader is experienced, directive behavior is called for and followers willingly take action leading to better performance. Conversely, when followers are knowledgeable and sophisticated, and the leader lacks experience, a nondirective leader style is called for (Murphy et al. 1992).

What are the lessons for crisis leadership derived from CRT and this line of research? First and foremost, crises that are particularly time urgent require leaders who are experienced enough to take quick and decisive action. Moreover, followers should have trust in the leader and submit to the leader's directive behavior. When the crisis is not particularly urgent, CRT argues that the leader should take the time to evaluate the situation, study it, and come up with a well-vetted action plan.

Charismatic Leadership Theory

There are numerous conceptualizations of charismatic leadership, beginning with Weber's (1947) idea of charismatic authority. According to Weber, followers are drawn to persons who possess some exceptional qualities (charisma) such that the individual subsequently emerges as a leader due to follower support. Later conceptualizations of charismatic leadership (e.g., Conger & Kanungo 1988) focus more on the leader's behavioral characteristics, such as the ability to articulate a compelling vision to followers, passionate commitment, trust, and likability. Followers tend to identify with, and be deeply committed to, charismatic leaders.

Willner (1984) suggests that charismatic leaders are more likely to arise in crisis situations, particularly when followers are distressed. Often a charismatic leader strengthens the leader-follower bond through promising deliverance from the crisis situation. As a result, group members gravitate toward choosing charismatic leaders under crisis conditions (Pillai & Meindl 1998) and evaluate them as being more effective in their leadership roles (Pillai 1996). In an experimental study it was suggested that the crisis situation itself caused followers to rate their leaders as more charismatic (Halverson et al. 2004). The effect of charismatic leadership under crisis conditions likely goes two ways: Followers are drawn to seek out charismatic individuals as their leaders, and leaders during crises are evaluated as being more charismatic and effective.

Another line of research focuses on the charismatic leader's behavior during crisis conditions, exploring both the nonverbal elements of leader behavior, as well as verbal/rhetorical behaviors. For example, expressive behaviors in terms of animated facial expressions, enthusiastic tone of voice, and nonverbal displays of confidence are part of the charismatic leader's tools to motivate followers (Awamleh & Gardner 1999, Holladay & Coombs 1993). Likewise, articulating a compelling strategy and vision, inclusive speech (e.g., "we" as opposed to "I"), optimistic messages (e.g., "we shall overcome"), and collective efficacy ("we can do it, together") are rhetorical behaviors that help the charismatic leader attract and mobilize followers (Bligh & Kohles 2008, Seyranian & Bligh 2008).

What are the lessons for crisis leadership learned from research on charismatic leadership? First and foremost, under crisis conditions, followers look to their leaders for direction, security, and reassurance (Kets deVries 1988). They also become more dependent and committed to charismatic leaders and more easily influenced by them (Shamir et al. 1993). The research also suggests that leaders in a crisis situation need to remain positive and upbeat and to present a compelling vision for the way forward. Leaders should also work to include followers in the effort to deal with the crisis.

Complexity Leadership Theory

Complexity leadership theory argues that today's world is complex with a variety of interconnected factors occurring simultaneously, at many levels, and across many contexts (Uhl-Bien & Arena

2017, Uhl-Bien et al. 2007). As a result of this complexity, leaders and their organizations need to have adaptive approaches to the challenges they face. For example, in a crisis situation, regardless of its type or source, organizational members need to work together to develop adaptive and creative solutions. This involves rapid sharing of information, generation and consideration of possible courses of action, functional and constructive conflict from diverse members, and the ability to quickly change direction. According to complexity theory, leadership does not start with the leader in a top-down fashion. Instead, it emerges from the complex interplay of people—leaders, followers, and other stakeholders—and the rich contexts in which said interplay occurs.

As an illustration of such an adaptive response to a crisis situation, Uhl-Bien (2021) cites the response to the COVID-19 pandemic whereby healthcare leaders, educators, and many businesses quickly moved to use existing technology for online delivery of services and the creation of a remote workforce. At the same time, scientists and healthcare professionals mobilized and collectively developed strategies to provide for infected patients and to develop vaccines and treatments—often without much assistance from the individual authoritative leaders or centralized governments that tend to be more bureaucratic, and less adaptive, in their response to crises.

Complexity theory suggests that a primary role for leaders is to enable adaptive responses to crises by enabling leaders and followers to take necessary action without being bogged down by bureaucracy or standard operating procedures. The leader's role is to create the space and provide support for various members of the collective to adapt, innovate, and self-coordinate in order to keep the crisis response efforts moving forward in a positive direction (Uhl-Bien 2021).

Taken together, these four seemingly divergent theories relating to leading through crises offer important lessons for leaders. Planning for crises is imperative, but not every crisis can be foreseen (Pearson & Mitroff 1993); therefore, leaders must be prepared to respond adaptively to unexpected crises. When crises are time-urgent, CRT suggests leaders need to be directive and take quick action; however, when crises are smoldering or of a more complex, less time-urgent nature, leaders' intelligence matters more than experience and a more considered, deliberated response is warranted (Fiedler & Garcia 1987). Charismatic leadership theory speaks to the personal demeanor of leaders in crises, indicating that a leader's composure, reassurance, optimism, and ability to articulate a vision of a way out of the crisis is essential to garnering buy-in from followers. Moreover, complexity leadership theory illustrates that in complex crises, leaders rely on the adaptive, emergent coordination of many stakeholders, meaning the role of a leader is less about providing direction and more about providing adaptive space for stakeholders to generate novel responses collectively. In addition to these lessons from theory, there are some key competencies for crisis leadership, which we discuss below.

KEYS COMPETENCIES FOR CRISIS LEADERSHIP

Previous crisis literature has broken the process of crisis management into distinct pre-, during-, and postcrisis phases. And, as mentioned above, precrisis planning, preparing, and setting up of early detection systems are fundamental to managing crises. A sad example is that of school shootings in the United States. In response to the initial rash of these tragedies, schools began practicing active-shooter drills, which have been responsible for saving lives in actual incidents of active shooters on campuses. Paying attention to the importance of precrisis planning, including early detection and prevention, is imperative; however, it is not possible to foresee and plan for every crisis. As the COVID-19 pandemic painfully demonstrates, not all crises have clearly delineated beginnings or ends, therefore blurring the distinction of pre- and postcrisis. So, instead of adopting a chronological or purely events-based approach to determine key competencies for

Figure 2

Key competencies needed for leadership in times of crisis.

crisis leadership, we instead distill five competencies that are crucial throughout the entire crisis lifecycle. Not all leaders will have to deal with crises the magnitude of the Fukushima tsunami and nuclear accident or the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, but most leaders will be tasked with leading through unforeseen crises of some scale, scope, or severity. The five competencies we discuss can serve all leaders in leading through crises and may aid in the selection and development of crisis-ready leaders. These five competencies are illustrated in **Figure 2** and detailed more fully in **Table 2**, which appears in the Facilitating Learning section.

Sensemaking

Originally elucidated by Weick (1988), sensemaking is a complex yet intuitive process whereby people connect cues and apply previous experience and knowledge to establish an understanding of what is going on when they are faced with novel situations or stimuli (Maitlis & Sonenshein 2010, Weick 1988). Given the ambiguous, disorienting, high consequence nature of crises, a leader's sensemaking skills are paramount. Crisis events "defy interpretations and impose severe demands on sensemaking. The less adequate the sensemaking process directed at a crisis, the more likely it is that the crisis will get out of control" (Weick 1988, p. 305). Therefore, it is key that leaders develop competencies in identifying, ordering, paying attention to, and making sense of unknown and ambiguous stimuli.

Preexisting expectations influence sensemaking. If we expect a system to fail, then we will quickly make sense of a flashing alarm as an indication that the system has failed. However, if we have no inkling of the possibility of a system failure, such as the failing of the American banking system, we are more likely to ignore even obvious early signals of failure. Preexisting experience and expectations influence sensemaking by preferencing frames that make it more likely to see and experience what we expect to see and experience (Maitlis & Sonenshein 2010), akin to a

self-fulfilling prophecy. The very act of sensemaking affects the unfolding crisis. "People often don't know what the 'appropriate action' is until they take some action and see what happens. Thus, actions determine the situation" (Weick 1988, p. 306). Weick (1988) uses an analogy of an explorer to illustrate the point. An explorer cannot know what is to be explored until she has explored it and looks back over the terrain to make sense of it. Similarly, when navigating crises, leaders need to think, make decisions, and act in order to get a sense of the nature of the crisis and its possible consequences, but doing so changes the nature and consequences of the crisis itself (Weick 1988). Combined, these two ideas—the tendency to apply familiar frames and the impact of sensemaking on the unfolding of the crisis—mean that crisis leaders are likely to shape the nature and direction of the crisis based on their previous experience, disposition, and sensemaking ability.

The concept of sensemaking occurs whether we are conscious of it or not, and there are two aspects of it that leaders need to be especially aware of in crisis situations: commitment and self-fulfilling prophecy. Commitment is necessary to moving forward: "[A] tenacious commitment to even the wrong plan provides a foundation for acting that is vital to keep people moving forward, constructing new meanings, and ultimately averting a more dangerous crisis" (Maitlis & Sonenshein 2010, p. 562). However, once individuals commit to something, it can blind them to alternatives; individuals "often generate explanations retrospectively to justify actions to which they have committed" (Maitlis & Sonenshein 2010, p. 562). Thus, leaders must remain conscious of the commitments they have made and open to the need to alter commitments in light of new evidence or the emergent consequence of previous commitments.

In times of crisis, sensemaking must be shared to create mutual understanding of what is happening, what it means, and what must be done (Maitlis & Christianson 2014, Maitlis & Sonenshein 2010). Sensemaking informs how crises are framed, either as inherently bad and scary or as challenging but imbued with opportunity. Effective crisis leadership requires conscious and conscientious framing to intentionally influence emotional responses (James et al. 2011). By framing crises as manageable and imbued with opportunity, leaders can diminish negative emotions and encourage emotions of optimism and resilience among constituents. A leader's ability to frame crises in rational, empowered ways can stabilize their own emotional response, thereby enabling them to make more rational, prudent, and ethical decisions (James et al. 2011) and to engage in more conscientious sensemaking.

What are the practical implications of sensemaking for crisis leadership? Leaders must remain aware of novel stimuli and reflexive of their own preexisting frames and limitations in recognizing potential early signals of crises. Knowing that crises involve active, if sometimes unconscious, processes of sensemaking can help leaders stay open to different interpretations of events and information and allow them to think, decide, and act more wisely. Importantly, leaders need to ensure that followers share their understanding of the crisis—its causes and consequences and the way forward (Carrington et al. 2019).

Decision Making

It is hard to dissect decision making entirely from the processes of sensemaking because sensemaking involves action-taking, which has been preceded by some element of decision making, albeit often implicit. However, when leading through crises, a leader's ability to make prompt, prudent, justifiable, transparent, good-enough-for-now decisions is paramount and warrants discussion. Decision making in crises is sometimes fast and sometimes slow but should always be based on the best available information and done in consideration of the consequences for the greatest variety of stakeholders.

In a crisis, leaders need to have "the ability to make wise and rapid decisions" (James & Wooten 2005, p. 148). While speed is important, seeking advice from others helps the leader

avoid personal biases and making knee-jerk or intuitive decisions based on preconceived schema or biases. Leaders need to seek advice but remain conscious of the temptation to abdicate decision making to subject matter experts. Seeking advice from experts is prudent, but leaders must remember that it is they who have the broadest lens on their organization and it is with them that the responsibility for final decisions rests (James & Wooten 2005). To make good decisions in crisis situations, leaders need to gather relevant information and evidence, seek advice from subject matter experts, and consult with other members of the leadership team and relevant stakeholders. It has been argued that leaders need to consider stakeholders' perspectives and situational and organizational consequences and to make decisions that are "tactful" (Kornberger et al. 2019). We also need to note that in the face of crises, leaders are often criticized as much for what they do not do as for what they actually do (O'Reilly et al. 2015), meaning that not making decisions is a form of decision making in and of itself, and usually a poor one.

Making decisions in times of crises is an ethically laden task because such decisions trigger "inevitable, complex, and urgent trade-offs (e.g., the greater good versus individual rights; responsibilities toward society versus fiduciaries)" (Alpaslan & Mitroff 2021, p. 1). Therefore, in addition to seeking expertise relevant to the nature of the crisis, it is recommended that leaders also consult ethical frameworks or experts to help guide the trade-offs that will inevitably leave some stakeholders worse off than others. A recent and vivid example of this is how jurisdictions decided, for better or worse, how and to whom to administer COVID-19 vaccines and allocate limited and essential equipment needed to keep critically ill COVID-19 patients alive. This illustrates that it is not only the process of decision making but also the content of decisions that matter, with the virtues of justice and humanity representing key bearings to decision making in times of crises.

What are the practical lessons for crisis leaders in relation to decision making? Leaders must engage in sound reasoning by carefully analyzing the situation, viewing the crisis situation from multiple perspectives, and considering all possible courses of action. Yet, a crisis demands urgent action, so decision making must be done carefully but quickly (Walumbwa et al. 2014). The leader plays a key role in soliciting information from subject matter experts and advisors, challenging assumptions, and ensuring the discussion stays on track. Conflict among the decision-making team is inevitable, and it is the leader's duty to keep the conflict moving in a constructive direction. Importantly, the leader is ultimately responsible for deciding the course of action that is prudent and best serves the common good (Riggio & Newstead 2023).

Communication

Since the earliest work in crisis management, communication has been widely recognized as an essential leadership competency (Coombs & Holladay 1996). In its broadest sense, communication has to do with exchanging information and creating shared meaning. In a crisis, where stimuli are novel and rapidly evolving, a leader's ability to receive and disseminate information and meaning is vital. Crises are not navigated alone, and it is communication that allows sensemaking to become shared and decisions to be accepted and acted upon by the collective. Communication enables buy-in and cooperation from the various stakeholders needed to navigate the crisis (Seeger et al. 2003). Leaders play a crucial role in facilitating communication between multiple stakeholders, helping to connect individuals and entities that need to communicate and collaborate, sometimes in new ways and often for the first time.

In a crisis, people look to leaders for direction. Therefore, it is important that leaders be visible and address the crisis immediately (Liu et al. 2020). In large-scale crises, top-level leaders need to decrease the sense of distance between themselves and stakeholders at all levels (Bligh & Riggio

2013). For instance, heads of state will often quickly travel to the site of natural disasters and provide televised assessments of the crisis to the public and explain action steps that are or will be taken. This serves three critical communication purposes: to (*a*) increase constituents' knowledge and understanding of the crisis, (*b*) engender trust in the leader and enhance the leader's credibility, and (*c*) allay affected constituents' fears and concerns (Tetteh 2020).

It is also important that leaders listen in times of crisis. By listening to stakeholders and making them feel heard, leaders can enhance their understanding of the effects of the crisis, build rapport, and demonstrate empathy. Making stakeholders feel heard and aligned with the leader can be aided by leader emotion regulation and emotional competencies (Humphrey 2002, Riggio & Lee 2007). Leading through crises is emotionally taxing for leaders, but tapping into humanity and empathy and taking on the emotional work involved in being truly present to others' suffering (Wilson & Newstead 2022) can mitigate the potential distance between or divisions among stakeholders. This, of course, demands leader discernment, resilience, and stress management (Bartone et al. 2013).

Disseminating information broadly and frequently is another key communication task in times of crises. Leaders should be encouraging and optimistic, yet realistic. They should focus on what is and can be done to solve the crisis, rather than focusing primarily on prevention of the negative consequences of the crisis (Stam et al. 2018). However, leaders also need to convey the severity of the crisis, not shying away from acknowledging true risks and losses. The leader's communication should be empathic and focus on the shared negative impact that the crisis is having on the leader and the stakeholders. A good example is the communication approach of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern during the COVID-19 crisis. Ardern communicated frequently, providing factual, science-based information about the pandemic and emphasizing the shared experience of all constituents. She was decisive, but compassionate—focusing on what all citizens could do to minimize infections through shared efforts and sacrifice (McGuire et al. 2020).

What are the practical lessons for crisis leaders in relation to communication? Every other function of crisis leadership relies on the leaders' ability to communicate clearly and compellingly with stakeholders. Leaders' communication needs to honestly account for the realities of the situation, engender trust, demonstrate humanity (compassion, empathy), and instill courage. Communication in times of crisis needs to be clear and simple, and it needs to carefully balance detached, evidenced-based information with sincere acknowledgment of personal hardship and reassurance that better times will come.

Coordinating Resources and Facilitating Teamwork

Leaders play a central role in coordinating activities of constituents to deal with the crisis. This includes delegating responsibilities to knowledgeable subordinates to take necessary actions. Crises require collaboration among various entities, so the leader needs to be effective at boundary spanning, which is the ability to create direction, alignment, and coordination among various individuals and groups to work toward a shared purpose or goal (Cross et al. 2013, Ernst & Chrobot-Mason 2010). In large-scale crises, leaders may need to collaborate with leaders from other organizations and entities, which may involve making concessions and compromising in order to move forward. This requires leaders to be flexible, humble, and able to manage conflicts (Kaiser 2020, Uhr 2017).

For teams to perform well in crisis situations, two important processes are trust in the leader (and among team members) and team resilience. The leader plays a critical role in both fostering trust and promoting resilience in preparation for, and during, a crisis. James & Wooten (2005)

argue that a foundation of trust is a first step in crisis leadership. Often trust needs to be developed between newly formed teams quickly, as captured in the concept of swift trust (Curnin et al. 2015).

A culture of trust and team resilience go hand-in-hand. Research suggests that the leader can help develop more resilient teams during times of stress or crisis. For example, Somer et al. (2016) found that leaders who were more transformational led more resilient teams, primarily because they promoted more positive affect and less negative emotions in team members—consistent with the idea that a leader should focus on more positive/optimistic promotion strategies than on the negative consequences of the crisis.

What are the practical lessons for crisis leaders in relation to coordinating resources and facilitating teamwork? In a crisis, leaders should be a "hub," helping to coordinate resources and team efforts. The leader should encourage diverse groups and individuals to work together to address the crisis, and the leader should empower these members to act and make decisions as appropriate, always ensuring that members are monitored and that communication lines are open and flowing. As noted, a leader demonstrating trust by empowering members should foster trust among team members. The leader also plays an important role in encouraging productive conflict by encouraging members' criticisms if they believe that something is amiss with an eye toward correction, and helping to reduce potentially destructive conflict, such as member in-fighting. By focusing on the common, superordinate goal of overcoming the crisis, the leader can minimize problematic conflict and increase team cohesion and trust (Lau & Cobb 2010).

Facilitating Learning

Not every crisis can be anticipated and planned for, but every crisis provides rich opportunities for learning. Indeed, even a colossal failure of crisis leadership, such as the US government's response to Hurricane Katrina, can offer opportunities to learn how to lead better in a crisis (Farazmand 2007). During and after a crisis, leaders must avoid the temptation to find fault or lay blame (Boin & Hart 2003). Instead, leaders should focus attention and energy on learning from the crisis in order to prepare for future crises and strengthen the organization. As Pearson & Mitroff (1993) note, organizations should examine the factors that enabled them to respond and perform well, as well as those that inhibited their performance. The best strategy is for the leader to nourish a "learning organization" culture that seeks to continually learn from crises and setbacks (Kayes & Yoon 2016).

Leading through crises provides lessons about many distinct elements of work and organization. Pearson & Mitroff (1993) identify at least five areas of crisis management, each of which pose distinct learning opportunities. First are lessons about technical failures, weaknesses, or protective factors, including everything from power outages to data breaches, or novel technical innovations. Second are lessons about human factors that can buffer against or weaken organizations to impending crises, especially in regard to how people's normal behavior and decision making may shift in crisis situations. Third are infrastructural factors that might expose weaknesses or offer protection against crises. Fourth are lessons about culture and shared norms, which can both perpetuate crises—for example, cultures of harassment or discrimination that smolder into crises such as class action lawsuits, or protect against crises for example, cultures of shared temperance and solidarity, such as we saw in regions where citizens willingly followed stay-at-home instructions in order to protect each other from the first wave of COVID-19. And fifth are the lessons that can be discerned in relation to collective or divergent emotions and beliefs that are stirred up in times of crises.

Cannon & Edmondson (2001, 2005) suggest that there are psychological barriers to learning from failure, such as fear of being blamed, threats to self-esteem, and stigma, that might prevent

learning from failure. The leader's task is to foster a shared culture of learning from failure and moving forward together. Research suggests that leader inclusiveness—being open-minded and available—builds a sense of psychological safety that also helps the team in learning from failure (Hirak et al. 2012).

On the basis of the learning opportunities crises present, leaders play a key role in establishing new norms in the aftermath of crises. This is something that cannot be done simply by issuing commands or dictating new policy and procedures (Williams et al. 2017). Rather, it takes leadership to role model, recognize, and reinforce adapted and desirable behavior. Moving forward, it is important for leaders to help reframe crises, not just focusing on the negative aspects but also viewing them as opportunities for organizations (and leaders) to grow in terms of their resilience and adaptability (James et al. 2011). Importantly, crises can deplete both organizational and personal resources, so it is important that leaders help the collective restore physical assets and replenish the psychological and emotional well-being of community members.

What are the practical lessons for leaders? To guide learning throughout, and especially in the aftermath of crises, leaders should reflect on questions such as the following (James & Wooten 2005): What have we learned about what works well in managing crises such as these? What have we learned about what works poorly? What changes or preparations might prevent similar crises in the future? The disruptive nature of crises often requires rapid and dramatic adaptations to work and organization, which can provide rich opportunities to learn possible new-normal practices, such as the dramatic increase of enduring e-health services and work-from-anywhere policies that emerged following lockdown and stay-at-home orders issued during COVID-19. **Table 2** concisely summarizes each key competency for crisis leadership and indicates prompts to guide a leader's thinking and doing in relation to each.

Table 2 Key competencies for crisis leadership

Competency	Description	Prompt
Sensemaking	In crises, leaders need to quickly determine what is going on, what it means, and what needs to happen. But crises are, by definition, novel and ambiguous. So, leaders must be able and willing to reconsider what they think they know and solicit alternative ways of seeing and thinking. Leaders must remain aware that the process of sensemaking involves acting and deciding, which invariably affect the unfolding of the crisis. Sensemaking also involves creating shared understanding and shared meaning, which are crucial to facilitating collective action.	■ What are the novel stimuli or cues that signal something new or different or challenging is occurring? ■ How can said stimuli be understood through existing or new frames of understanding? ■ How can said stimuli be translated into shared understanding and shared meaning (which are required for collective action)?
Decision making	Decisions in times of crises are high-stakes and often must be made quickly. This requires accruing accurate information, considering diverse perspectives, adopting sound mental schema, and cultivating the prudence to determine the right decision at the right time for the right reasons.	■ What new or different information can be considered? ■ How can conflicting perspectives be integrated to inform better decisions? ■ What are the foreseeable outcomes of this decision? ■ Who benefits and who suffers from this decision and how?

(*Continued*)

Table 2 (*Continued*)

Competency	Description	Prompt
Communicating	It is through communication that the collective action needed to survive the crisis will, or will not, be achieved. Communication should be open, clear, sincere, frequent, emotionally appropriate, and multidirectional. Stakeholders need to be aware of what is going on, what is required of them, and what is being done to support or protect them. Stakeholders also need to feel heard and reassured.	■ What do stakeholders need to know? What do stakeholders want to know? ■ How can messages best be crafted? How can messages best be disseminated? ■ What emotions need to be acknowledged, managed, and/or communicated? ■ Who needs to feel heard?
Coordinating teamwork	Leaders are not solely responsible for navigating crises, but they play a central role in coordinating the effort of myriad others in doing so. In a crisis, leaders need to solicit diverse perspectives and expertise, encourage constructive conflict, and allocate resources and authority prudently. Leaders need to strike a balance between monitoring and empowering others.	■ Who is best placed to fill which roles or functions? ■ Which people or teams can be brought together to achieve the most impactful results? ■ Which individuals or teams need what resources, access, or support to achieve which objectives? ■ When and for which processes is close monitoring required, and when is empowerment preferred?
Facilitating learning	Crises sharply identify weaknesses and vulnerabilities, but they can also identify strengths and new ways of working better. Both after and throughout a crisis, leaders should actively search for lessons that will help their organization recover and improve.	■ What internal and external factors precipitated this crisis? ■ What internal and external factors helped mitigate or contain this crisis? ■ What lessons does this crisis have for ongoing, new-normal operations?

FUTURE RESEARCH

In the years since COVID-19 was first detected in Wuhan, China, every person around the world has been affected by the ensuing pandemic, making it the most high-consequence crisis of modern history. The novel and ambiguous nature of the pandemic has meant that organizations, communities, and governments across the globe have been navigating an ongoing crisis for years, as well as dealing with smaller, discrete crises such as imposed lockdowns and restrictions, extreme stress and some collapses of healthcare structures, and ongoing supply chain and labor disruptions and challenges. As we write this, it appears the COVID-19 crisis will persist for the foreseeable future. Unsurprisingly, COVID-19 has spurred a surge of research on crisis management and leadership (e.g., Dirani et al. 2020, Grint 2020, Stoller 2020, Uhl-Bien 2021, Wilson 2020, Wilson & Newstead 2022, Wu et al. 2021). The pandemic has made it abundantly clear that crises are something that all leaders, at every level around the globe, will have to navigate. Other global crises, such as global warming, the potential for economic recessions, and international conflicts, ensure that crisis leadership will be an important research topic now and in the future.

On the basis of our assessment of the current research landscape, we foresee future research growing in three major directions. First is a need for greater clarity and theorizing around the distinctions and intersections of crisis management and crisis leadership. Second is the need for more nuanced intercultural and cross-national considerations. And third is the need for a greater focus on the ethics of leading through crises. Below, we briefly elucidate each of these three future research directions and in **Table 3** we provide specific avenues for further inquiry within each direction.

Table 3 Future research

Future research domain	Avenues for inquiry
The distinction(s) and intersection(s) between crisis management and crisis leadership	■ Exploring how informal, local, place-based, and collective leadership unfolds in crises ■ Analyzing the discrete and intersecting roles of leadership and management in crisis response and recovery ■ Closer examination of how extant theory explains—or fails to explain—leadership in crisis situations ■ The development of new theories of crisis leadership
Cross-national and cross-cultural implications for crisis leadership	■ Explorations of experiences and impacts of crises and/or responses to crises based on diverse and intersecting identities and cultures ■ Investigations of how crises affect and/or are affected by diversity and inclusion within organizations ■ Reviews of diverse and/or alternative and/or historical cultural traditions related to crisis response and recovery ■ Inquiry focused on understanding the functions of culture in cross-national and global crises ■ Determining competencies required for leaders to initiate and coordinate crisis responses that transcend demarcated boundaries of authority (regional/national borders)
Leadership ethics	■ Determining ways to account for ethical crisis leadership competencies in leader selection and development ■ Exploring, developing, and assessing ethical decision making within situations of perceived urgency ■ Assessing how well extant ethical decision-making frameworks and/or education prepares leaders for crisis leadership ■ Employing experimental methods to determine how or if ethical decision making can be triggered in high-stress situations ■ Investigations of the short-term, intermediate-term, and long-term effects of ineffectual and/or unethical crisis leadership, including historical accounts and/or real-time documentation and analysis of crises as they unfold

Future Research Direction 1: The Distinction(s) and Intersection(s) Between Crisis Management and Crisis Leadership

The first area of future research that warrants attention is the relationship and/or distinction between crisis management and crisis leadership. Historically, the literature has made distinctions between leading and managing. When it comes to crises, these functions are both essential, but they remain distinct. However, with the exception of a few works, the bulk of the crisis literature has focused on preparation, containment, and recovery—often under the guise of reputation management or market recovery (Coombs 2007). A research stream focused more explicitly on the functions of leadership in crises would explore dynamics such as formal and informal influence, relationships, collective effort, vision and purpose, and the attributes (traits, virtues, knowledge, skills, abilities) most essential in leading through crises. There has been a recent surge in crisis leadership research spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, including special issues in both *Leadership* (2020) and the *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* (2022). Further research might build on extant leadership theory such as CRT or complexity/adaptive theories to help identify the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and processes most essential to effective crisis leadership including an exploration of how these vary according to the magnitude and duration of a crisis and the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of early leadership responses.

Importantly, when crises strike, it is not only those in legitimate positions of power who demonstrate leadership; people at all levels and in myriad ways engage in leadership by initiating local

responses, facilitating collective efforts, and motivating others to help with recovery efforts. This is often what happens in natural disasters that affect a specific region, as evidenced by the efforts of the local fishing guides in British Columbia's Fraser Valley during the region's epic floods in 2021. Of their own volition, a group of local fishing guides coordinated the use of their personal jet boats to navigate flooded and washed-out roads to rescue stranded people and livestock from communities that had been otherwise completely cut off by road and were without power, drinking water, a heat source, or medical facilities (Luymes & Fumano 2021). This is a clear example of local, informal, place-based, and collective leadership in a time of crisis, the likes of which are currently rarely examined in the crisis leadership literature (although see Sanfuentes et al. 2021).

When faced with crises, we need more than individual top-level managers focused on containment and recovery. We need collective/shared leadership—individuals and groups at multiple levels who can and will creatively problem solve and inspire collective effort and shared purpose. Future research will need to develop distinct theories of crisis leadership that explain both formal leadership through crises (e.g., CEOs or elected officials) and informal and organic collective leadership (e.g., the Fraser Valley fishing guides). As we learn these valuable lessons about crisis leadership, it is imperative that effort goes into helping select leaders who are good at leading in a crisis and also developing crisis leadership that is distinct from crisis management. In their recent review of crisis leadership, Wu et al. (2021) suggest the need for a "process view" of crises—spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that this multiyear crisis has evolved over time and that the prior research on crisis "stages" is limited. We agree and believe that shifting focus from crisis management to crisis leadership will incorporate and advance a process view of crises.

Future Research Direction 2: Cross-National and Cross-Cultural Implications for Crisis Leadership

A second substantive direction for future research is the issue of cross-national and cross-cultural dynamics. Crises increasingly transcend national borders and therefore require cross-national leadership. COVID-19 and the climate crisis are obvious examples. But crises such as product recalls by global manufacturers or equipment malfunctions resulting in supply chain disruptions can also demand cross-national negotiation and collaboration. However, on this topic, the research has been silent. Future research, we suggest, needs to focus explicitly on the competencies and practices required of leaders in leading through crises that do not stop and start neatly at the edges of formally demarcated authority. What knowledge, skills, and abilities do leaders need to cultivate to lead their teams and organizations through crises that demand coordinated responses from regions or countries within which the leader has no formal authority?

Related to but distinct from the complexities of leading through crises that transcend national and regional borders is the complexity of understanding and remaining sensitive to the multiple intersecting cultures of the individuals and groups impacted by a crisis. This line of inquiry is tangentially related to, but expands on the notion of, leader emotion management in crisis (Wu et al. 2021; see also Thiel et al. 2015). For example, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was lauded for her cultural sensitivity when she covered her head while visiting grieving Islamic families whose loved ones were murdered in the 2019 mosque attack, showing consideration and respect for the Islamic community (Malik 2019). Conversely, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison was widely critiqued for his demeanor and conduct, which were believed to perpetuate—or at least fail to mitigate—a toxic male culture within the Australian Parliament in 2021 (Moore 2021, Sullivan 2021).

No leader will get every element of cultural sensitivity right all the time, especially when under the pressures of a crisis situation. However, a genuine understanding of and sensitivity toward the diversity of modern organizations is crucial, and we encourage future research that takes a

culture, inclusion, and diversity lens to crisis leadership. This will be especially important as the climate change crisis continues and adaptations are demanded of diverse peoples, from fossil fuel consumption to deforestation and agricultural practices. Future research in this direction might include micro-level inquiries exploring intersecting cultural experiences of individuals and small groups, meso-level inquiry examining culture and diversity within a single organization, and macro-level inquiry focused on understanding the functions of culture in cross-national and global crises.

Future Research Direction 3: Leadership Ethics

A final, but critical, avenue for future research is the issue of ethics. In crises, people suffer, usually some more than others (Alpaslan & Mitroff 2021). Crises demand quick decisions and action that invariably favor some people over others. Often the extent of the ramifications leaders make in times of crises are unknown until much later, meaning leaders need to make trade-offs and decide on actions that will have severe but somewhat unknown consequences. Knowing how to navigate such ethical dilemmas, and being able to do so well and quickly, is essential to good crisis leadership (Bauman 2011). Yet, the field of ethical or good crisis leadership is vastly underdeveloped. Alpaslan & Mitroff (2021) have opened this line of inquiry, but it is essential that their work is followed by future research efforts. Future research in this direction might include examining the ways ethics, morals, and virtues—or lack thereof—are evidenced in past cases of crisis leadership, as well as those required in future cases. Of particular interest will be future explorations of how and why divisions occur between stakeholder groups in times of crisis, and how leaders may mitigate such divisions and/or mend them once the initial urgency of the crisis has passed. We saw such divisions occur and spiral into destructive events as governments transitioned to "living with COVID-19," including trucker convoy movements and anti-vax riots. Similar divisions are evident in the fallout of crises including the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol during the certification of the presidential election, and its aftermath. The division between supporters of the insurrection who believed that the election was illegitimate and that action was warranted and those who sought to prosecute the insurrectionists and prevent such crises from happening in the future is ongoing. This suggests that a long-lens approach is needed in the study of crises to examine the crisis event, the immediate aftermath, and the lingering effects over time.

Diverse methods are required to advance the state of crisis leadership research. Case studies, longitudinal evaluations, multimethod explorations, rich qualitative work, and experimental methods all have a role to play in advancing our understanding of what good crisis leadership entails and how to support and develop it. In the end, it will be important to develop robust, testable theories of good crisis leadership. It will also be important to review and extend the leader selection and development literatures to identify how a capacity for crisis leadership is, or should be, accounted for.

CONCLUSION

Not all leaders will be tasked with navigating major crises, but all leaders will likely face some scale or scope of crisis in their tenure. It is important that leaders are familiar with the different types and common dynamics of crises, so that they can be attuned to early warning signs and recognize a crisis when it arises. In times of crisis, leaders serve critical functions, from enabling collective sensemaking to making responsible decisions, communicating widely and prudently, coordinating resources and teamwork, and facilitating learning. These key crisis leadership competencies are required no matter the type or scale of crisis and should be factored into leader selection and development. As momentum grows in crisis leadership research, we encourage a focus on the distinctions and intersections between crisis leadership and management, the implications of

cross-national and intercultural dynamics, and the ethics of leading through crises. Crises will continue to occur, most likely in increasing frequency and complexity, meaning it is essential we commit to continued efforts to research, teach, and develop capacity for good crisis leadership.

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