Keys to Building and Maintaining a “Reservoir of Goodwill”

On the evening of September 17, 2006, five members of the Duquesne University men’s basketball team were shot after leaving an on-campus dance in the Student Union. As President of the Student Government Association at the time, I recall feeling overwhelmed with emotion as calls poured in from friends who witnessed the event. In the days and weeks to follow, I received a glimpse into the public and behind-the-scenes activities of crisis leadership at a university. Some of these moments remain vivid today: reviewing talking points with university communication professionals in preparation for interviews with media outlets; gathering in solidarity with friends, faculty, and administrators during an evening outdoor prayer vigil; participating in meetings with a newly formed Security Review Committee to examine the incident and offer campus security recommendations; and engaging in deep and honest dialogue with others regarding issues of unity and inclusion. The soul of the institution was disrupted and fractured due to this unprecedented act of violence, and as a community, we were invited by President Charles Dougherty to draw upon the “reservoir of goodwill” as a source of hope and healing.

Though I was unaware of the impact this would have on my own professional and scholarly development, this period of turmoil and reflection in the aftermath of the campus shooting ignited a curiosity in me to better understand the dynamics of crisis leadership within and across higher education. The topic of crisis leadership carries an added significance for those engaged in the work of higher education as we respond to the current convergence of crises that threaten our institutions and society, including the continued impact of the global pandemic, growing economic concerns, sweeping societal unrest, heightened political polarization, and the ongoing disruption caused by climate change. These crises demand attention from those engaged in the study and practice of leadership, and what follows are three central findings from my research and recent book, *Crisis Leadership in Higher Education*, which can contribute to the ways in which we make sense of crises and crisis leadership, organized around the themes of preparation, perception, and principles.
Preparation

Despite the academy’s commitment to learning, the preparation, training, and development of leaders, particularly within the context of crisis, have not historically been a priority for colleges and universities beyond the most senior levels of administration. There are many explanations for this absence of adequate leadership preparation across higher education, including over-reliance on on-the-job training, the tendency to view disciplinary or technical expertise as the primary predictor of excellence in leadership, and perhaps even the treatment of leadership or administrative work as the “dark side” of the academy. In our programs and research at the Center for Organizational Leadership at Rutgers University, we have written extensively on the need to rethink traditional approaches to leadership development in higher education (Gigliotti & Goldthwaite, 2021; Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2017).

In previous decades, crises on college and university campuses were relatively rare and episodic. Much has changed, and it has changed quite rapidly. Rather than being isolated incidents requiring the attention exclusively of presidents, chancellors, or communication professionals, the proliferation of crises across campuses means that crisis leadership has now become fundamental to the work of university personnel across levels, disciplines, and institutions (Gigliotti, 2019). Preparing leaders at all strata of our institutions to engage in the work of crisis leadership is critical as we seek to learn from the current exigencies facing institutions of higher education and adequately prepare for those moments of discord and disruption that inevitably lie ahead.

Popular approaches to crisis planning include informal and formal seminars and workshops, emergency tabletop exercises, full-scale operational exercises, crisis communication simulations, operations-based exercises, and functional exercises. Regardless of the formal preparation strategies that an institution adopts, the pursuit of these initiatives helps to cultivate an environment where members of the community are more crisis-aware and more likely to take responsibility for addressing the short-term and long-term disruption posed by crisis situations.

Perception

What constitutes a “crisis?” Some situations, such as the previously mentioned active shooter incident or the cascading impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, are widely understood as “crises.” Many would agree that crises disrupt and derail organizational practices, threaten individual and institutional reputations, and require rapid responses; however, crises often lie in the eye of the beholder. For this reason, the ways in which individuals disentangle a “crisis” from “non-crisis” or “potential crisis” is much less certain, and analyzing the complexity of this disentanglement proves to be an important intellectual and applied exercise for organizational leaders (Gigliotti, 2020). Given that crises are perceived and defined differently by a wide array of institutional stakeholders—of which there are many in higher education—leaders must seriously consider the ways in which potential crises are perceived by internal and external constituent groups. Individual perceptions matter, and as socially constructed phenomena, crises exist if others perceive the existence of crisis. The failure to respond meaningfully to these events of perceived crisis has the potential to erode the trustworthiness and credibility of leaders; complicate future leadership decisions and actions; and perhaps even amplify, elevate, and escalate the situation to a level of heightened concern beyond what was instigated by the original event.

Given the importance of stakeholder perceptions, a sensible approach is for leaders at all levels of the institution to engage in deep reflection regarding these existing perceptions and to consider how best to engage with various audiences during periods of heightened sensitivity and elevated risk. Furthermore, it is incumbent upon leaders to
engage in behaviors that demonstrate a shared understanding of the severity of a prospective crisis. Finally, leaders should systematically assess the perceptions of others and track trends in public perception through the use of available tools. Of course, given the multitude of stakeholders and the variability of opinions, perceptions of crisis will vary, so the ability to filter multiple sources of information and prioritize responses in accordance with stakeholder perceptions and organizational values are critical leadership strategies (Gigliotti, 2020).

**Principles**

As I write in my book, crises are disorienting and unwieldy events for an organization and its leaders. These seemingly senseless and highly complicated moments become crucible experiences for those with leadership responsibility. It is in the darkness and chaos of crisis where values-based leadership becomes most critical, most visible, and most desired (Gigliotti, 2019). Recognizing, endorsing, appreciating, communicating, and behaving in accordance with the core values of an institution are important during times of normalcy and stability. When responding to crises—what Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2018) define as “specific, unexpected, and nonroutine events or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both opportunities for and threats to its high priority goals” (p. 18)—it is essential for leaders to rely on these shared values and principles as a guide, an anchor, and a source of stability.

Crises threaten individual and organizational reputations, but the tendency to react to these challenging moments in ways that are primarily centered on preserving and protecting one’s reputation is both short-sighted and problematic. Rather, effective crisis leadership involves responding in a manner that reflects and reinforces the mission and core values of an institution and acknowledges the significance of the crisis for those individuals most directly impacted. Know what you stand for as an institution, and respond boldly to crises in ways that underscore these essential principles.

**Conclusion**

Referring to some crises as “cosmology episodes,” Weick (1993) describes the profound impact such events have “when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system” (p. 633). As he goes on to suggest, “What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together” (p. 633). Those engaged in leadership play a critical role in helping members of the community make sense of the uncertainty, volatility, and deeply fractured sense of normalcy posed by crises.

When navigating an institutional or environmental crisis, the following questions can equip leaders and members of the college or university to improve their understanding of the crisis, strengthen communication with stakeholders in the aftermath of the crisis, and encourage collective learning:

- What happened?
- Why did it happen?
- Who are directly and indirectly impacted?
- How does the crisis impact our mission as an institution?
- In what ways might this crisis disrupt the current and future operations of our institution?
- What is our strategy for responding swiftly to the immediate crisis?
- What can and will we do to ensure this does not happen again?
Crises have a profound impact on those most directly affected by the disruption—an impact that can ripple across the campus community and alter how an institution and its leaders are perceived internally and externally. Crisis leadership requires a commitment to the preparation of leaders across an institution, an awareness of the power of perception in shaping impressions of an organization, and an unwavering and steadfast adherence to the principles and values that unify the members of a diverse community. As current crises and the crises of tomorrow threaten higher education, it is my hope that we will respond to these unsettling episodes with care, compassion, clarity, and a commitment to the wellbeing of our communities—all while contributing to the “reservoir of goodwill” from which we may need to draw upon in the future.

For Further Reading


References


