

Best-Practice Guide to Crisis Leadership, Decision Making, and Communication



What's involved in crisis leadership

Leaders aren't born, they're made. And that's nowhere truer than in the crisis setting, where the capability to lead effectively should never be assumed or taken for granted.

But what's involved in crisis leadership, exactly? Well, the function of a crisis leader is to stabilize a fluid situation, instill confidence, and bring out the best in everyone.

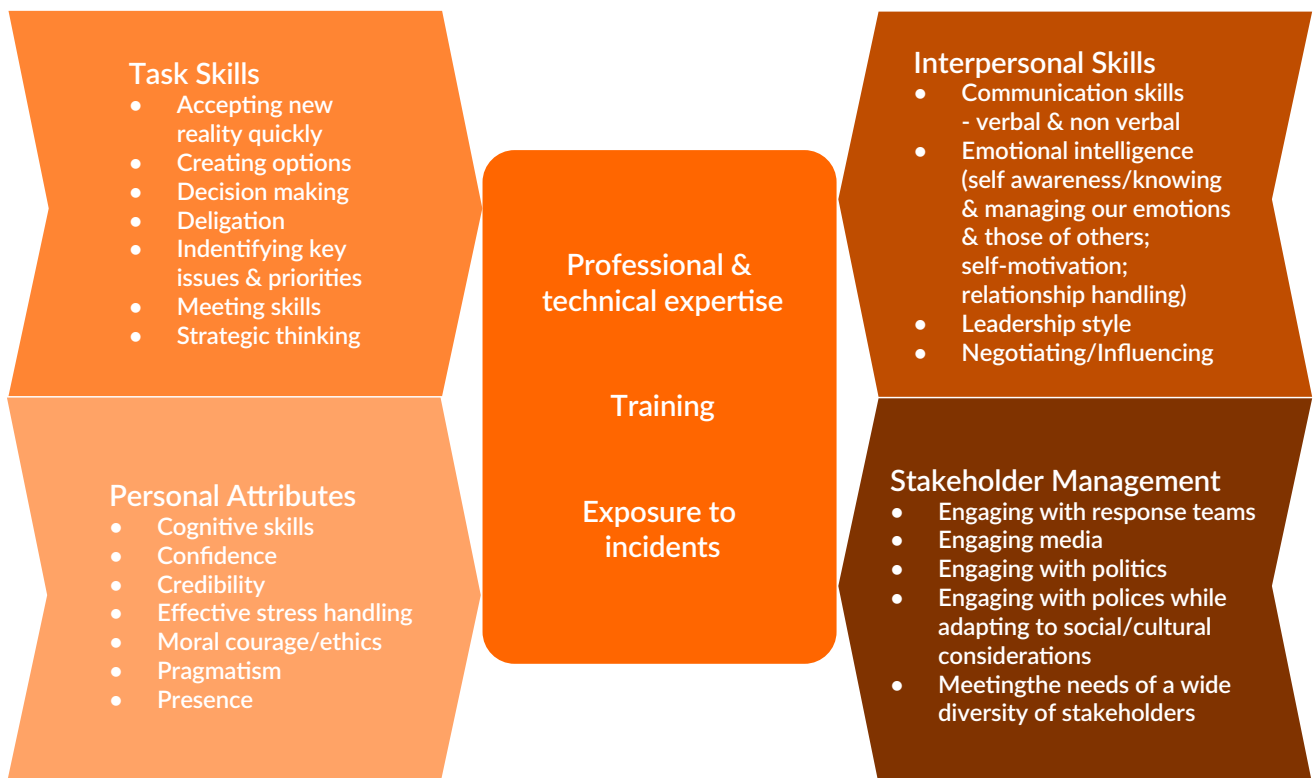
Crisis leaders do so by providing clear direction and control.

However, it's not always possible to impose order on a chaotic situation quickly.

To do so, crisis leaders must demonstrate integrity, empathy, compassion, authority, and determination. These personal attributes work to defuse tension, provide a focus for activity, and reassure interested parties that responsible and competent leadership is on top of things.

Providing calm, caring, assertive engagement, crisis leaders also work to leverage team strengths, encouraging creative thinking, promoting accountability within a no-blame culture, taking timely action, and unequivocally assuming appropriate and ultimate responsibility for the crisis management.

The diagram below, extracted from international crisis management standard ISO 22361, illustrates the mix of skills required by crisis leaders.



Source: ISO 22361: 2022

Roles and responsibilities of the crisis leader

Of course, crisis leadership is more than a collection of personal attributes. The crisis leader must lead the crisis management team (CMT), ensuring that the team is activated when a crisis takes place and is operating as intended.

During the crisis, the leader presides over executive meetings, determining their timings and frequency, and setting the agenda. The crisis leader also reviews who's on the team as well as how each member performs.

The most important crisis task, though, is to promote shared situational awareness among stakeholders, which often requires the crisis leader to challenge evidence and thinking and encourage the rest of the CMT to do the same.

The crisis leader also determines the crisis management strategy, sets the strategic aim, and identifies objectives for the different teams and departments contributing to the response.

That responsibility entails continual review of and updates to crisis-related outputs. This helps to ensure that departments, teams, and agencies report regularly against their objectives and make appropriate progress.

Per best practice, the remaining crisis leadership responsibilities include:



Consult widely and advise top management of progress, strategy, and required actions



Review and authorize strategies for interested-party communications, including public and media information produced by the communications team



Promote the creation of a cross-organizational consensus, as appropriate, indicating the reasons for overriding any advice or recommendation



Remain in their assigned strategic role and direct and empower subordinate leaders



Recognize dilemmas and understand that a decision needs to be taken based on what's known at the time



Encourage the CMT to concentrate on defining what's to be done and not the operational and technical detail of how it's to be done



Ensure that decisions are based on the best information available at the time, and are compassionate, proportionate, necessary, ethical, legal, and aligned with the organization's values



Think creatively, being prepared to think outside the paradigms of normal operations and organizational culture



Ensure that decisions and underlying rationale are recorded and documented to permit scrutiny and analysis after the event, so that lessons can be identified



Determine when it's desirable and safe to scale down or stand down the response



Ensure identification and follow-up of important experiences, lessons, and learning

Facilitating the wellbeing of responders

Crisis leaders are also responsible for the wellbeing of their team members. This has traditionally been challenging. As, by dint of their role, responding members will have exceptional demands placed on them.

From the research, it's well understood that these demands erode physical and emotional wellbeing. It therefore falls to crisis leadership and other senior leadership to investigate, review, and implement measures to mitigate such impacts. Potential measures to take in this regard include the following:



Assigning responsibility for monitoring wellbeing of individuals or their families



Training, validation, and awareness



Identifying sufficient personnel to fulfil crisis management roles



Resources for dealing with distressing issues



Supporting wellbeing and fatigue management for those responding



Providing access to specialist resources and timely individual support to address well-being concerns that cannot be triaged by the organization (psychological support)

What is strategic crisis decision making

Beyond looking after the wellbeing of the CMT, crisis leaders must also make effective decisions during a crisis. This isn't easy.

Indeed, crisis decision making, like crisis leadership (more broadly), is a skill that must be learned and refined. But how?

Crisis decision making itself is the selection of a course of action from more than one option. At a basic level, it includes establishing the situation, identifying the relevant issues, generating options, evaluating the options with reference to the desired end-state, and making a choice.

The challenges of crisis decision making

All along, though, the decision-making process will be affected by the values, weight factors (including legal, technical, operational, etc.), priorities, and preferences of decision-maker(s). What's more, the exchange of information during this decision-making process necessarily impacts the decision or the level of consensus achieved.

That's specifically what makes crisis decision making more challenging than routine decision making. Indeed, the informational challenges associated with the crisis environment (e.g., lack of knowledge and abundance of rumors, assumptions, and misinformation) are particularly threatening to effective decision-making.

Uncertainty, owing to these informational challenges, significantly increases a decision-maker's stress. And that can negatively affect cognitive processes, increasing the likelihood of flawed decision processes and poor decisions.




Furthermore, crisis decision-making doesn't always follow a clear-cut decision process. Again, differences in values, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, intentions, competencies, and capabilities also place extreme psychological pressures on the CMT and other affected personnel across the organization.

Further decision-making challenges include:

-  Groupthink
-  Stereotyping
-  Confirmation bias
-  Disproportionate emphasis given to preferred sources
-  Tunnel vision and fixation
-  Failure to challenge assumptions of various types
-  Wishful thinking
-  Premature closure on a particular interpretation, position, or path of action.

Overcoming crisis decision making challenges

All is not lost, though. Decision-making models, themselves not a guarantee of success, exist to make the task more manageable. And according to best practice, the following three primary considerations are implied within such models:

-  **Situation.** Situational awareness involves an appropriate knowledge of these factors: What is happening? What are the impacts? What are the issues? What are the risks? What can happen? What is being done about it?
-  **Direction.** What end-state is desired? What is the aim and objectives of the crisis response? What overarching values and priorities will inform and guide this?
-  **Action.** The effectiveness of actions should be monitored and reported on. What needs to be decided? What needs to be done? When to resolve the situation and achieve the desired end-state?


How, then, do these simple models help deliver effective crisis decision-making?


According to best practice, organizations will need to identify the factors that improve the effectiveness of strategic decision-making in a crisis, including implementing, at an organizational level, policies, structures (teams and roles), plans, processes, and tools to support the organization's crisis management capability as a whole and the CMT in particular.

That's not all. Crisis leaders and their teams should seek out experience in crisis decision-making environments both as individuals and as teams.

Crisis leaders will also need to commit to training CMT members in the use of decision techniques to help reduce the effect of uncertainty on their cognitive abilities as well as to improve recognition of the signs of weak decision-making, including a failure to challenge evidence, assumptions, methods, logic and conclusions, and the adoption of measures to provide alternative perspectives.

Further measures crisis leaders can take to improve their team's crisis decision making include:




-  Developing the ability to keep the scope of the decision-making process at the strategic level, providing the adequate framework, delegation, high-level direction for dependent decisions, and actions at the tactical and operational levels, without micromanaging and unnecessarily limiting them

-  Creating and supporting the development of team characteristics that address task conflicts and allow members to feel safe in displaying proactive behavior in a climate of psychological safety.

Crisis communication and its challenges

Effective crisis communication (both internal and external) also figures prominently in effective crisis decision making. It's crisis communication, after all, that enables the crisis capability to position itself and the organization as the central sources of information, thereby demonstrating control of the situation and reassuring interested parties.

Of course, numerous challenges stand in the way of effective crisis communication. The most significant include:

-  Unclear messages which do not convey the desired information
-  Failure to use the appropriate channels to reach the desired audiences
-  Failure to use the relevant or appropriate language for the target audience including the use of complex or technical language which can confuse those reading or listening
-  Failure to respond to public feedback and amend outgoing messaging accordingly
-  Failure to recognize appropriate priorities
-  Failure to approve messaging in a timely manner against the level of urgency
-  Failure to identify and understand the emotional relatability of the situation, and communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges and defuse conflict
-  Failure to coordinate the consistency of communication with relevant participating interested parties.









The crisis communication plan

Overcoming these challenges will entail developing an effective capability to communicate internally and externally during a crisis. It's out of this capability that emerges a consistent message that conveys the organization's reaction to a crisis as well as provides information concerning (1) what's known at the time, (2) what's being done to address the issues, (3) and the crisis response at both the human and organizational level.

And that's where the crisis communication plan comes in. Organizations develop such crisis communication plans to set out the roles, responsibilities, and actions to be taken by members of the communications team and those supporting them.

The plan itself sets out a structured approach to managing a communications response by (a) assigning clear responsibilities and accountabilities, (b) establishing procedures and tested arrangements for invocation, and (c) identifying the options for resourcing to meet high levels of demand.

What else goes in the crisis communication plan? It should include:

-  Draft holding statements
-  Guidance for call takers
-  Fact sheets and press kits
-  Locations for press conferences
-  List of media channels to be utilized
-  Tools and systems to help manage social media monitoring and engagement
-  List of interested parties and a management matrix
-  Contact information for resources, including spokespeople

The role of digital crisis management technology

Communication plans don't just execute themselves, however – not even with the best people. Crisis management technology will be needed to establish a process for gathering, analyzing, sharing, and managing crisis-related information to facilitate crisis decision making.

Generic capabilities to consider when procuring such platforms include:



Rapid plan and team activation. Leverage pre-configured crisis playbooks and checklists to allow quick activation and dispatch of your crisis response teams. Automate and track task allocation to ensure everyone knows what to do so you can restore normal operations ASAP.



Easily communicate and share information. Built-in communication and collaboration tools like chat, email, SMS, and voice messages make it easy to work in real time with your team, to better coordinate your response and keep everyone informed.



A central location for incidents. Monitor and generate crisis response tasks, as well as log and share updates, decisions, facts, and assumptions. Produce situation reports and save time briefing stakeholders on the latest.

However, digital critical event management technologies should only be procured if they are purpose-built to manage complex communications.

What does that look like? Organizations should be enabled to use a single system to centralize, approve, standardize, and manages their crisis communications. Only such a solution provides effective communication pathways for all aspects of crisis and incident management.

What to look for, specifically?
Consider the following capabilities:



Send email, SMS, voice, and app push notifications to people, groups, or roles



Define message templates, with dynamic content populated from a related event or other data



System inbox to receive email messages



Relate messages to events, assets, or other objects, to form part of that record and include in timelines



Include message response links in email or SMS, and audible response prompts in voice messages, to capture responses from recipients



Include links back to objects in the system in your message content



Automate messages, notifications, and responses using dedicated workflows



Define system email addresses to organize communications according to business areas and manage who can view and respond to certain communications

Best-practice digital crisis communications technology at a glance

Key use cases supported	Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Message template designer. Standardize and speed up your email, SMS and voice communications using message templates, with dynamic inserts of event information or other data. • Message reporting. Easily monitor inbound and outbound communications and responses from recipients, with quick access to events, assets, or other objects related to a message. • Simplify communication processes. Automate messages, notifications, and responses using workflows and automatically escalate communications based on incident severity. • Stay informed from anywhere, on any device. Take your responsibilities to go and respond to incident notifications, task assignments, and updates; or create, edit, and send messages directly from your dedicated, mobile crisis management app. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quickly inform, collaborate, and share information in real-time using chat, email, SMS, voice, and app push messages • Standardize and speed up communications using message templates with dynamic inserts of event information or other data • Relate messages to events, assets, or other objects, to form part of that record and include in timelines • Include message response links in email or SMS, and audible response prompts in voice messages, to capture responses from recipients • Include links back to objects in the system in your message content • Define system email addresses to organize your communications according to your business areas and manage who can view and respond to certain communications • Segment and organize your contacts into groups for targeted communications • Monitor inbound and outbound incident communications and responses • Automatically escalate communications based on incident severity


Finally, the stark deterioration of the resilience environment makes best practice approaches to crisis leadership, decision making, and communication more important than ever. But organizations can't just settle for reading standards, they must implement the prescribed best practices expeditiously and commit to constant improvement.

To this end, crisis management platforms applying best practice, such as Noggin's, come in handy. Built on ISO standards, these platforms enable faster response with better collaboration using best-practice plans and playbooks, smart workflows, and real-time dashboards and insights, to ensure better incident leadership, decision-making, communication, and continuous improvement.



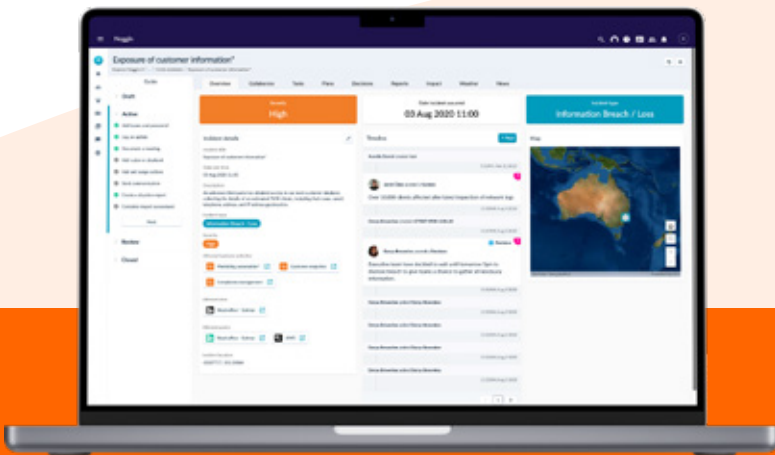


Like what you read? Follow Noggin on social media

 @teamnoggin

 facebook.com/teamnoggin

 linkedin.com/company/noggin-it



noggin for Crisis

To learn more,
visit: www.noggin.io
or contact: sales@noggin.io

Meet the next-generation tool for corporate crisis and business continuity management teams to collaborate, plan, track their response, and share information. Built on the Noggin Core platform, Noggin Crisis gives response teams and decision makers the tools to know what's happening, collaborate quickly and effectively, make better decisions, and enact the right plans to take action when it counts the most.

The Noggin Crisis solution pack is backed by the Noggin Library with hundreds of plans and best-practice workflows, out of the box, and installed in minutes.