

LEADERSHIP

How a Good Leader Reacts to a Crisis

by John Baldoni

JANUARY 04, 2011

There is something about a big snowstorm that brings out the best, or more often the worst, in big city mayors. If, as former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill once said, "All politics is local," then you would think that the first hint of snow in the forecast would prompt mayors to relocate their offices temporarily to where the snowplows are dispatched.

Mayor Mike Bloomberg, who recently won a third term, and is widely regarded as an adept city leader, has come under fire for inefficient snow removal in New York City. Most of the complaints came from residents in the so-called outer boroughs – e.g., the four that are not Manhattan.

But across the Hudson, Newark Mayor Cory Booker has received acclaim for his response to the nor'easter snowfall, despite taking flak on a host of other matters. Not content with supervising removal, he plunged in with a shovel, helping to extricate cars, clear walkways, and in one instance deliver diapers to a housebound mother. He also tweeted his first-hand observations of the snow to his more than one million Twitter followers.

We like to see our elected officials in action. The contrast between Bloomberg's reception and Booker's can serve as a lesson for anyone in a position of authority. Here are some tips for the next big storm that hits your office:

Take a moment to figure out what's going on. An executive I know experienced a major disruption in service to his company. He was the person in charge and he told me that at the first response meeting everyone started talking at once. The chatter was nervous response – not constructive – so he delegated responsibilities and then called for a subsequent meeting in an hour's time. This also helped to impose order on a chaotic situation.

Act promptly, not hurriedly. A leader must provide direction and respond to the situation in a timely fashion. But acting hurriedly only makes people nervous. You can act with deliberateness as well as speed. Or as legendary coach John Wooden advised, "Be quick but don't hurry."

Manage expectations. When trouble strikes, people want it to be over right now – but seldom is this kind of quick resolution possible. It falls to the leader in charge to address the size and scope of the crisis. You don't want to alarm people, yet do not be afraid to speak to the magnitude of the situation. Winston Churchill was a master at summing up challenges but offering a response at the same time. As he famously said when taking office in 1940, "You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word. It is victory; victory at all costs; victory in spite of all terror; victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no survival."

Demonstrate control. When things are happening quickly, no one may have control, but a leader can assume control. That is, you do not control the disaster – be it man-made or natural – but you can control the response. A leader puts himself into the action and brings the people and resources to bear. Think of Red Adair, who made a name for himself putting out oil fires that no one else could. A raging blaze may seem uncontrollable but Adair knew could control the way it was extinguished.

Keep loose. Not only does this apply to personal demeanor – a leader can never afford to lose composure – it applies to the leader’s ability to adapt rapidly. A hallmark of a crisis is its ability to change quickly; your first response may not be your final response. In these situations, a leader cannot be wedded to a single strategy. She must continue to take in new information, listen carefully and consult with the frontline experts who know what’s happening.

As much as we like to see senior executives pitch in and help with the heavy lifting, there is a limit. A senior executive’s prime role is setting direction. If he or she is engaged too much in front line responsibility, then who is doing the vision thing? Some executives still enjoy doing that hands-on work; they like the rush of adrenaline that comes from direct action. Too bad. That is not their job any more.

Leaders have another important role during a crisis and that is to **provide perspective**. As Mike Useem has written in *The Go Point*, an insightful study of decision-making, effective leaders can often do more by standing back from the action.

It is why, as Useem notes, that the team leader in mountaineering expeditions often remains at base camp rather than hiking to the summit. That way, if trouble strikes, he can direct the response with the perspective that comes from seeing the mountain as a whole and the conditions that affect the summit team.

The measure of a leader is often tested during a crisis. And those leaders who can engage directly, but still maintain their sense of perspective, are the ones that will help the organization survive.




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John Baldoni is an internationally recognized executive coach and leadership educator. His most recent book is *MOXIE: The Secret to Bold and Gutsy Leadership*.

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