CHAPTER 2

What Is Crisis Leadership?

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11, NIV)

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ’s sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. (1 Peter 5:1–4, NIV)

Crisis leadership is a very important part of leading in today’s world. Every organization goes through some form of crisis on a fairly regular basis. This chapter is intended to define what a crisis is and what its impact may be on the organization. Additionally, a distinction between crisis management and crisis leadership will be made and an overview of crisis leadership research will be provided.

The two passages at the beginning of this chapter provide us with a good summary of what crisis leadership should mean to all Christians. On the one hand, the words from Jeremiah tell us that the Lord already knows the trouble we will have to endure and that we should have faith that we can overcome them. While this is very comforting news, this does not mean that we can sit idly by and hope that things work out. Rather,
we are to do as instructed in 1 Peter and in other parts of scripture and serve as leaders and examples for others during tough times.

**What Is a Crisis?**

Before delving into the discussion of crisis leadership it is important to define what a crisis is. A crisis is generally defined as a situation that develops quickly and requires a response from a person or an organization in order to mitigate the consequences. Here are some examples of the way researchers and practitioners have defined it:

A specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization’s high priority goals. (Seeger et al. 1998, p. 233)

The military defines it as:

An incident or situation that typically develops rapidly and creates a condition of such diplomatic, economic, or military importance that the President or SecDef considers a commitment of U.S. military forces and resources to achieve national objectives. It may occur with little or no warning. It is fast-breaking and requires accelerated decision making. Sometimes a single crisis may spawn another crisis elsewhere. (Joint Chiefs of Staff 2011, pp. II–29)

Here are a few other definitions from other scholars:

A crisis is change – either sudden or evolving – that results in an urgent problem that must be addressed immediately. For a business, a crisis is anything with the potential to cause sudden and serious damage to its employees, reputation, or bottom line. (Harvard Business Essentials 2004, p. xvi)

Crises, catastrophes, and calamities are an unfortunate but inevitable fact of life. They have been with us since the beginning of time. It can be argued that they will be with us until the end of human history itself. In short, they are an integral part of the human condition. They *are* the human condition. (Mitroff 2004, p. 33)
A crisis is an unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending – either one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome or one with the distinct possibility of a highly desirable and extremely positive outcome. It is usually a 50-50 proposition, but you can improve the odds. (Fink 1986, p. 15)

These definitions, both from scholars and practitioners, share several things in common. They all point out that crises happen quickly, many times without warning, and in order to be considered a crisis, they must imperil an organization’s objectives or goals while forcing the organization to take steps to mitigate the possible consequences. It is important to note that many, if not most, organizations do not have a defined concept of a crisis nor a list of what constitutes a crisis to their organization. This would be helpful for many reasons. Chief among these reasons, in terms of importance, is that by having a list of events describing what constitutes a crisis, the organization will be much quicker to recognize and respond and will be less likely to overreact when less severe events occur.

Why is having a definition of a crisis important? How we define it will predict and dictate how we see the world. With a good understanding of the definition of a crisis is we can also be better prepared to lead and respond when needed. We have all likely been in situations where an event occurred and only several people, or maybe only one person, viewed it as a crisis. While the minority of the group is responding to the event as a crisis the others can’t quite fully understand what the big deal is. This is exactly the situation that can be avoided when proper crisis planning is conducted and a generally agreed-upon definition of a crisis exists for the organization.

A person’s worldview impacts how they define a crisis. People who have a secular or atheistic worldview will see a crisis as an opportunity for man to conquer nature and for the strongest to survive and succeed. Those with a more animistic or spirit-ruled worldview will see a crisis as something that cannot be prepared for or even responded to but rather as something that must be submitted to. Finally, those of us with a Christian worldview will see a crisis as something that is of God but that He will help us respond to if we follow His way. Those people who see their time on earth as an end will more than likely see a crisis as a possible end. Christians should see a crisis as only one part of our time on earth that is leading to our ultimate salvation and entry into God’s never-ending kingdom (Miller 1998).
The relationship between a leader’s viewpoint and a crisis goes both ways. Our perception of a crisis based upon our worldview, can become reality because our actions will be shaped by this perception. Boin et al. (in Couto) (2010) explained the importance of perception to crisis in the following definition:

In sum, crises are the combined products of unusual events and shared perceptions that something is seriously wrong. However, no set of events or developments is likely to be perceived fully uniformly by members of a community. Perceptions of crisis are likely to vary not only among communities—societies experience different types of disturbances and have different types and levels of vulnerability and resilience—but also within them, reflecting the different biases of stakeholders as a result of their different values, positions, and responsibilities. These differential perceptions and indeed accounts of a crisis set the stage for crisis leadership. (p. 230)

This means that if we perceive a crisis a certain way, we may change it into what we think it is. Similarly, how we view difficult events in our lives can, over time, impact our worldview and how much control we believe we have over difficult situations. This is why a leader needs to be prepared to guide the organization through a potential crisis.

**Crisis Events for an Organization**

As mentioned earlier, it is important for leaders to prepare their organizations for a crisis by educating the members on what the group defines as a crisis (Pearson and Clair 1998). Below is a suggested general list of events that can be edited to fit the needs and specific circumstances of an organization. This should be a starting point for a leader to consider when evaluating the types of crisis that might affect their organization (Table 2.1).

As you can see from this list of crises that can impact an organization the scope and severity can vary greatly. Many of the listed items are events that occur outside of the organization while others, like corporate reorganization, happen internally. In addition to being able to bin crises as either external or internal occurrences, we can further group them into several different categories across the spectrum of impact to an organization (Harvard Business Essentials 2004). The list below represents how
Table 2.1 Examples of crisis events (Author’s creation based upon Coombs 2007; Lewis 2006; Harvard Business Essentials 2004)

| Crisis Events                                      |
|----------------------------------------------------|
| Natural disaster                                   |
| Product recall                                     |
| Environmental mishap                               |
| Transportation accidents                            |
| Protest against the organization                   |
| Work-related death or injury                        |
| Disruptive employee                                 |
| Security/Data breach                                |
| Social media incidents                              |
| Product tampering                                   |
| Attack or protest on customers                      |
| Terrorist attack                                    |
| Stock issues/corporate takeover                     |
| Disruption of utilities’ access                     |
| Corporate reorganization                            |

these categories can be separated into like events with a few examples for us to consider:

Accidents and Natural Events—Hurricane Sandy, Hurricane Katrina, Australian wildfires, Tohoku earthquake and tsunami.

Health Disasters—Coronavirus, Ebola, and Zika virus.

Technological Accidents—Chernobyl, Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, and Gulf oil spill.

Economic Problems—Impacts from the Coronavirus of 2020, The Great Recession, and The 1970s’ Oil Crisis.

Geopolitical Turmoil—Gulf War, Hong Kong Protests, and The Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Unethical Actions—Enron, Bernie Madoff scandal, and Wells Fargo scandal (Harvard Business Essentials 2004).

This list and the table presented before it are only a limited representation of crises that can occur. They are intended to provide the leader with an idea of what sort of things may happen so that they can develop a top ten list of possible crises which they can develop their crisis action plan to combat. Having this list of ten of the worst things that might happen to the organization is important not just so you can prepare for the specific crisis. It is also important so that you can get your organization to start preparing in a general sense, for any crisis that might occur.

It is interesting to note the difference between a crisis and a disaster. While many treat the two as one and the same, and most view the
response as the most important thing to consider, there is a difference that should be considered by an organization. Bhaduri (2019) explains this difference best when he writes, “a disaster happens within the larger environment in which some crucial element of an organization is situated” while a crisis typically happens to an organization but does not cause an issue for most of the units external to the organization. You can see from this list above that the Tohoku earthquake and subsequent tsunami are listed disasters while the resulting crisis of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident is listed as a separate crisis. This definition appears to pertain mainly to scope but it is important for an organization’s leadership to understand the difference so they can communicate effectively and accurately what is really happening.

It is important to understand that one disaster and even one crisis can lead to additional crises. This is true in the case of tsunami leading to a nuclear reactor meltdown and it is also true of a corporate crisis that is mismanaged that leads to an even larger crisis like what we have seen with companies like Enron and Wells Fargo. There is more value in the planning for a crisis than in a prescriptive response that can be prepared for a specific crisis since we never know precisely what might occur. One of the favorite sayings in the military planning community is “plans are nothing, but the planning is everything.” This simple saying acknowledges that the plans made may not be implemented perfectly due to the varying circumstances of the crisis. What is important is the planning process where all of the different variables and possible responses can be considered so that an organization is ready when the crisis happens. This benefit from the planning process is why a plan should never be “put on the shelf” for years. Instead an organization should have an active planning cycle where plans are reviewed and discussed yearly, if not more frequently.

Natural disasters have occurred since time began and they have always affected humans within close proximity to them. With the population of the earth constantly expanding and humans spread out across the earth these disasters tend to affect more people than in the past. What we see even more today are crises that are not related to natural causes. Large-scale factory accidents, nuclear plant mishaps, corporate crime and mismanagement, and oil refinery explosions, are a few of the examples of crises we can view as more internal and preventable than natural disasters (Mitroff 2004). And today’s man-made crises can rival the worst impacts we have seen from any natural disasters. The exponential improvement in technology combined with the flattening of the world around us has given rise to a world where many now view crisis as a way of life. What this means is that crisis leadership is even more important now than it has
been in the past. We need crisis leaders who are prepared for crisis as a way of life.

Crisis leaders are not needed simply to guide organizations out of crises. Research shows that more and more of the crisis we see today are caused by human error. Typically, it is not just a simple error by one person that leads to a major crisis. Instead, it is typically a chain of errors or an overall systemic error involving humans that leads to most of the crises we see in organizations (Simonsson and Heide 2018; Perrow 1984).

When we look at a crisis, we should understand the difference between error and risk. As was just explained, error is something that can be prevented by an aware leader who encourages their organization to report errors and work to improve in the areas identified. Risk, on the other hand, is typically not avoidable. When reviewing risk, we assume that something will happen, and we project the likelihood of when it will occur and how badly the organization will be affected. We should not make error and risk synonymous because our organizations should be encouraged to identify areas of human error, report them, and correct them. In short, we should not place error and risk in the same category when we plan for the crises that will inevitably come (Simonsson and Heide 2018).

**Biblical Examples of Crisis**

The Bible provides us with plenty of examples of crisis and people’s response to them. While the Old and New Testaments are different in many respects, they both contain many examples of crisis and how those affected responded to these difficult times. And while I agree with Irving and Strauss (2019) that “the Bible is not a handbook on leadership” I do believe there is much that can be learned from scripture on how to lead, especially during a crisis.

From almost the beginning of the Bible we are presented with stories of people and groups in crisis. We see several specific examples of crisis leadership with Moses. In Exodus 6:6–7 God tells Moses to inform the Israelites that He will deliver them out of their servitude to the Egyptians. Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your
God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians’. (NIV)

Do you think the Israelites believed this and were encouraged to respond to this crisis? I highly doubt it. We read soon after that “Moses reported this to the Israelites, but they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and harsh labor” (NIV). It is almost unfathomable to think that the Israelites, after being told very clearly that they would be saved from their current situation, decided not to listen to Moses because their situation seemed so difficult and hopeless. It may seem unfathomable but is it any more unfathomable than what we see today when people are going through crisis and do not think they will ever get beyond the issue facing them? We are not that much different than the Israelites but as leaders we must see beyond our current situation and instill confidence in our people that we will be able to overcome the crisis facing us. We should use our faith in God to bolster this confidence and allow us to lead through the crisis presented to us as authentic leaders.

Think back to difficult times in the life of your organization or in your personal life. Was your first instinct to reach out to God for His support? The Bible teaches us that the most prudent thing for us to do, and the thing God implores us to do is reach out to Him during our time of need. There probably is no better figure to evaluate on leading during a crisis in the Bible than Moses. Time after time he faced difficult circumstances that he could only overcome with the help of God. Did he have doubts? Most certainly. Early on in Exodus 3:11–14 Moses questioned how he could be expected to lead.

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.” Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’” (NIV)

But by the time the Israelites had been led out of Egypt and were about to be engaged by Pharaoh by the sea near Pi Hahiroth it became
obvious that Moses understood the importance of believing in God when challenged by a crisis. We see this clearly in 14:10–14.

As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians?’ It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!” Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.” (NIV)

This education of Moses to trust in God during difficult times is what leaders need today. No matter the crisis or difficult circumstances that present themselves we must first believe in God and understand that He will be with us during any problem. While it is difficult to first see this—even Moses was not convinced at first—it is imperative for leaders in today’s world to live this way in order to improve the ability of their organizations to survive crises and to even thrive during such challenging times.

The story of Moses reminds us that life can be difficult at times for us as individuals and as collective groups. Nowhere in the Bible does God tell us that life will be easy. We are told that we will have a better life in heaven, but this implies that our life here on earth will have many struggles and crises for us to overcome.

The main thing we should take away from this is that God is with us during a crisis and that he wants us to overcome the challenges presented to us. One great example of this is seen in Mark 4:35 where the disciples and Jesus were threatened by a storm while at sea. Upon seeing waves breaking over the boat the disciples woke Jesus and asked why he did not care if they drown. Jesus calmed the storm and then asked why the men still did not have faith in him. This example shows us that even the disciples, men who were close to Jesus and witnessed him conduct countless miracles, still had moments when they lost faith. With this understanding it is not too difficult to see why leaders today can sometimes forget their faith.

We read in the Bible that God understands we will have difficult times and He wants us to succeed. It is written in James 1:12 that “Blessed is
the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that
person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those
who love Him” (NIV). God knows we will have challenges, but He wants
us to face them head-on and lead our organizations to success with Him
by our side.

God knows that life is imperfect, and we see many examples in the
Bible that this is so. What is perfect is our life beyond earth. The first
thing we need to understand is that God knows that there will be crises
for us individually and in our organizations. We need to trust that He will
stand strong with us through these crises. He wants us to succeed and
has a plan for each of our organizations and for each us of, personally. Of
course, like many things in our walk with God, this is easier to say than
for us to actually do. Accordingly, we must stay rooted to our faith and
be steadfast in our beliefs.

**Crisis Leadership vs. Crisis Management**

Much like scholars have generally defined leadership and management as
different entities, crisis leadership and crisis management should be simi-
larly treated as distinct from one another. When looking at both concepts
researchers generally regard crisis management as concentrating more on
the distinct steps taken to respond to an individual crisis while crisis lead-
ership is more concerned with enduring issues that come from leading
during a crisis and how leaders can prepare their organizations to better
handle these situations over an extended period of time (Mitroff 2011).
Klann (2003) explains the difference between crisis management and cri-
is leadership very well.

Traditionally, books and articles about crisis management place a great deal
of emphasis on management actions to be taken in preparation for a crisis.
This focus on management functions implies that you can prepare for a cri-
is by writing a plan and then executing it when the crisis occurs. Certainly,
an effective leader is competent in such functions as planning, organizing,
staffing, budgeting, controlling, and directing. But a narrow emphasis on
management strategy and planning ignores the leadership necessary for
putting the plan into action. That kind of approach sidesteps the human
element that plays such a large role during a crisis—the needs, emotions,
and behaviors of people at all levels of the organization. (p. 27)
Boin et al. in Couto (2010) describe the subtle difference between crisis management and crisis leadership in the following statement, “we should not assume that crises are simply bad news for leaders, with crisis management focused purely on damage limitation, both operationally and politically. Crises may also provide leaders with unique opportunities to discard old policies and commitments, kick-start new ones, reform public organizations, and reshape the political landscape by forging new coalitions (p. 230).”

Prewitt and Weil (2014) provide us with a good understanding of what it means to lead during a crisis instead of just reacting in an effort to simply manage the situation.

Reactive leadership and crisis management have been synonymous for years. This flows from the belief that crisis is unpredictable and unexpected, which is simply not true. Crisis has its genesis in the values, beliefs, culture, or behavior of an organization which become incongruent with the milieu in which the organization operates. A leader, who is able to read the signals of looming crisis and understands how to harness the exigency brought on by the situation, can diminish the potential dangers and take full advantage of the resulting opportunities. (p. 72)

I believe we need to reframe how we look at crisis management compared to crisis leadership. For years crisis management has been synonymous with general clean up and recovery operations. In the leadership field we need to focus on crisis leadership since this connotes a definitive difference versus the simple management of a crisis and promotes leading with a broader and more holistic view of crises. Here the point is that the immediate clean up of and reaction to a crisis both fit much better in the definition of crisis management while the leader who uses the crisis to improve the organization can be seen as conducting crisis leadership. This is not to say that crisis management is not important because it is definitely vital, rather it is to say we need to prepare leaders to do more than manage the effects from such events.

Crisis management, in short, is not sufficient for the world we live in today. We need the leaders of our organizations to do more than simply respond and react to crisis events. While crisis management is concerned with how to respond in the short term after a crisis a crisis leader will be proactive and will prepare their organization for an event before one occurs. Furthermore, a crisis leader will see how different crises connect
Table 2.2 Differences between crisis leadership and crisis management (Author’s creation)

| Crisis leadership                          | Crisis management                                      |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Long view of events                       | Short view of events                                   |
| Proactive                                 | Reactive                                               |
| Learn during a crisis and from errors     | No learning from a crisis. Respond and move on         |
| Plan for many different potential crises  | One plan for all crises                                |
| Communicate to stakeholders the wide      | Communicate the “response plan”                        |
| range of potential crisis                 |                                                        |
| Involve others in the plan and the        | Drive the response when the time comes                 |
| response                                  |                                                        |

and can be used to improve their organization over a long period of time (Table 2.2).

Pearson and Clair (1998) framed organizational crisis as, “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.” This definition moves beyond the somewhat simple definitions of a crisis and adds to it the impact felt by the entire organization in terms of the ambiguity and stress and the role of the leader in guiding the process through sound decision-making.

**History of Crisis Leadership**

As long as there have been organizations and leaders there have been crises for them to overcome. We see many examples of good and bad crisis leadership in every field imaginable such as the military, government, industrial, and church fields just to name a few. Similar to the fact that the study of leadership is a relatively new discipline compared to many others, the study of crisis leadership is also relatively new. Research in this specific area of leadership has burgeoned within the past 25 years due to the numerous large-scale crises we have seen during this period combined with the sharp increase in the speed that news travels due to the internet and social media. Whereas in the past we would have had to wait days or weeks to hear about a crisis, and even longer before we could attempt to understand the role of the leader in the specific crisis, now we know
many of the specifics within moments after a crisis occurs. In addition to providing access to more information this has also caused researchers as well as the general public to probe for information on the actions of leaders during these moments in order to better understand how their leadership style impacted the ultimate response.

The military has one of the longest histories with dealing with crisis response. They have also been in the lead with their training for leaders on how to best respond when unexpected events occur. The military tends to view crises as part of a much larger plan for battles, campaigns, and strategy. They teach their commanders to understand how the crisis will impact the larger organization of the defense department and ultimately, the nation as a whole.

The business world has also begun to realize the importance of being prepared to respond during a crisis since one misstep here can lead to the end of a company if the response is not well thought out. This increase in preparing business units has grown dramatically from the 1980s but so has the level and severity of the crises seen. Business continuity planning and crisis response plans are much more commonplace in medium and large-scale businesses than it was in the past (Lewis 2006). What is missing, in most instances, is a focus on leading throughout the crisis lifecycle. What is missing in even more instances, are leaders who lead from a Christian perspective trusting in God to help them shepherd their organizations through such troubles. This book is one effort to reinforce the value of living with Christ through whatever happens.

**Summary**

Crisis leadership is important to both the student and the current leader. It is important that we understand what a crisis is and what it might look like so that we are better able to detect one and put a plan into action. While crisis management and crisis leadership may appear similar the differences are apparent when you see that crisis management is more concerned with the immediate recovery effort while crisis leadership looks at the enduring role of a leader before, during, and after the crisis. The remainder of this book is intended to serve as a guide for leaders to incorporate their faith into their leadership as they stay faithful with the knowledge of what God has done, what He can do, and what He has promised to do. Several new ways of looking at crisis leadership from a
Christian perspective will also be presented and should serve to encourage continued thought and conversation on this important subject.

**Key Takeaways**

1. A crisis is a fast-developing event that puts the organization at risk and forces it to act.
2. Personal and organizational worldviews affect how crises are perceived.
3. Crises are increasingly caused by events other than natural disasters.
4. Crisis leadership is more than simply leading an organization through the response to a crisis.
5. Leaders should lean on their faith to make it through a crisis.

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