

Leadership in Crisis Situations

LESSONS FROM THE FRONT LINES



If the axiom is true, that a good crisis should never be wasted, the urgent question is how to make the best of the current economic meltdown.

Crises call for a special brand of leadership, whether the theatre of operations is commercial or military, says Martin Vine, chief operating officer of IIC Partners.

Vine is a former brigadier-general with the British Army, whose assignments have taken him to crisis situations in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq. "I've been privileged to witness leaders in pressure situations, where basic discipline and standard procedures were vital and leadership and creativity made the difference.



Brigadier-General Martin Vine amid the ruins of an Iraqi palace.

"From the outset, I want to acknowledge that in the army, you don't have to make a profit. And in business nobody's shooting at you," he says. "But my brother, a successful business leader, assures me that business really is war. And now that I'm in the private sector I agree there are similarities. Whether you're chasing profits or dodging bullets, survival is the first essential. After that, you have to know how to exploit the situation."

From his own experience in Iraq, Vine cites General David Petraeus, of the United States Army, as an exemplar of leadership. Amid the pressures of command, Vine says, Petraeus made time to walk the ground and talk with soldiers and civilians alike.

"They say that the best fertilizer is the farmer's boot and that's certainly true in this case. Iraq was once feared a lost cause, but the drop in violence

there is widely credited to General Petraeus, who achieved this, in large part, by his personal engagement."

In a crisis, Vine says, leaders must understand the dynamics and psychology of crisis.

"These are harsh situations with big issues and, frequently, limited resources. They're exhausting and unrelenting, often over long periods of time. You frequently don't get any good news and leaders can lose their bearings and forget what they're all about.

You must not allow frustration and exhaustion to lure you into thinking that the ends justify the means. Once lost, integrity is very hard to get back. You cannot have integrity without respect and, equally, you cannot be respected without integrity."

Reactions

He said leaders also have to recognize that adversity will create certain predictable reactions in everyone around them.

"The first reactions are shock, anger and then denial." People in shock face a fight-freeze-or-fly reaction, which military training

aims to override with discipline. But Vine says the same reactions can be seen in business crises, where there's little or no formal training to counter-balance gut reactions.

"People in shock ask, why did this happen, or why me? Angry people look for someone to blame, while those in denial try to shut out reality and revert to familiar routines, in effect, fiddling while Rome burns," Vine says.

"People who get stuck in these reactions are either useless or destructive. Leaders have to move these people to a state of ownership of the situation, where they understand that no one else is going to get them out of trouble."

Vine was stationed in Pakistan when a major earthquake struck in 2005. Believed to be the 14th most destructive earthquake of all time, the official death toll was 79,000. An estimated 3.3 million were left homeless in the

mountainous region of Kashmir, where aid was impeded by landslides that removed roads and dammed rivers.

Vine described a brilliant example of leadership by a Pakistani Brigadier-General, amidst the terrible destruction. "This senior officer was deployed with his Brigade some miles to the South West of the epicentre when the earthquake struck. He understood the scale of the event and that a major rescue effort must be mounted without any delay.

"Lacking orders, the general relied on standard military procedures and 'marched to the sound of the guns,' in this case, toward the heart of the affected area. As they proceeded up the mountain valleys, the sun blotted out by dust, villages lay in utter devastation and refugees, in their thousands, stood stunned, helpless and crying. The general described it as like a scene from hell — and he said that he and his officers felt overwhelmed by the chaos.

"He took his command team behind a pile of rubble to devise a plan. They swiftly agreed that nothing in their training had prepared them for this situation. After consideration, however, he fell back on military tactics that seemed the closest fit. Adapting an approach called 'advance-to-contact', he dispatched reconnaissance far out in front and advanced the remainder in a wide sweeping movement up the valley. Every five miles a large post was erected to mark a rendezvous point and an officer left with around a hundred soldiers to assist casualties, provide food, water and shelter and marshal helicopters.

"That general saved a lot of lives and the key was that he made time to think and to create a simple, flexible plan based on concepts his people already knew. That was enough to move them from shock to ownership and action."

Attitudes

Vine says it's also vital for leaders to know how to assess and employ their people in crisis situations.

"A superb senior leader, General

Hugh Pike, once taught me that in crisis there were four categories of people – survivors, stickers, thrivers and failures.

“Ninety per cent of people are ‘survivors’ – content to keep at it but needing leaders to guide them. Most of the rest are ‘stickers’ – determined individuals who have the resilience to hold others up – ‘the planks that survivors cling to.’ And, a very few ‘thrivers’ will emerge. These do not always stand out in more stable times but rise to the occasion, inspiring others, often thinking and acting outside of the box. They are gold dust and you need to keep an eye out for them and nurture them when their time comes”.

“Finally, of course, there will be a very few failures who must be removed as quickly as possible for the health of the team. This is an area where leaders will have to be ruthless, overriding personal loyalties to act in the best interests of their team.”

Purpose

Once crisis psychology is taken into account, Vine says, leaders must demonstrate purpose and build momentum.

“Time is precious in a crisis, with decisions often based on minimum knowledge — but opportunities must be found to think and gather information from a wide variety of sources. Making time to consult and encourage feedback is a great investment that will add quality to the planning process and earns people’s trust. Leaders must communicate their intent and ensure total ‘buy in’ by their organization.

“One of my heroes, Field Marshall Viscount (Bill) Slim achieved just this. In 1942 he took over the demoralized British 14th Army, a diverse multicultural formation, as they were driven back to India by the Japanese in a brutal fighting retreat from Burma. Over two years he physically and morally turned them round to retake Burma. His success was based on a deep understanding of his organization, always delivering his promises and on a gift for inspiring focus and conviction amongst his commanders to communicate to their troops.

“A corollary is ‘beware cynics’

– people incapable of conviction. Their attitudes are contagious, tend to create failure in others and, like failures, must be removed. Skepticism is a valuable trait but cynics are destructive and must be sent packing.”

Action

Once a sense of purpose has been instilled, the time has come to take action, Vine says.

“Build a secure base, whether that means sandbagging your position or developing support within the board of directors. You need to be able to concentrate on the job at hand, without immediate concern for the security of your position.

“Keep your inner team small, tightly knit and fully informed. More than six is probably too many — but if you only have three perhaps you should look around. At least one of those people should be a creative, outside-the-box thinker. And if it’s not you, you need to find that talent within others.

“Then make a plan that will bear up under the pressure of events. It has to have clear and realistic objectives and be easily understood by those who are expected to put it into action. Communicate clearly and with conviction. Plan not only for the crisis, but for the period that comes after. Know where you’re going when the breakthrough comes.

“And never underestimate the power of symbolism. Share the pain and when the going is tough, drop in on your people to see how they’re doing. Be seen to care, be involved and recognize success. When the CEO drops in to people’s offices late at night, word gets around.”

Momentum

Eventually, Vine says, planning, execution, conviction and stamina turn the tide and the crisis breaks. At this point, he says, it’s vital to keep momentum on your side.

Remember that momentum can be a fleeting thing. Always be sure to recognize and reinforce success, not failure, he says. This is no time to relent, by giv-

ing authority back to those who came up short in the crisis.

Having selected good leaders to get you through the crisis, it’s now time to trust them to do the right thing. But, he says, there’s also an opportunity to seek out and promote people who’ve ‘made things happen,’ in order to assert wider control of events and maintain momentum.

Stay active and engaged and watch for signs of trouble. This is the time to consolidate gains, synchronize, co-ordinate and communicate.

Success

“Whatever your field, whatever the crisis, the principles of leadership are enduring and they’ll serve you well,” Vine says. “The keys are:

- Lead from the front and show personal commitment to the project and the team;
- Show belief — in your objectives, your team and yourself. Your people can’t perform if any of these is missing.
- Keep the plan simple and the objectives clear. If the project is multifaceted, divide responsibilities to promote focus.
- Focus on key objectives — don’t get drawn into tangential issues and don’t let your people go off task.
- Seek out lateral thinking — find the people who can see the problem from



Then Brigadier-General Martine Vine (centre) seen in Iraq with Steve Casteel, Senior Advisor to the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior (left), and then Two-Star General David Petraeus of the US Army. Petraeus, now a Four-Star General, has since become a worldwide symbol of leadership in crisis situations.

a new angle that provides new leverage.

- Look deep and anticipate — be ready for setbacks but envision success and create the self-fulfilling prophecy.
- Be ruthless when necessary, but take care of your people. If you’re just a ruthless person you won’t engender the

support you need.

- Remember that crises are often broken by sheer stamina and ability to absorb hard knocks and bad news.

“Finally, someone once said, ‘Never waste a good crisis,’ and I believe that’s good advice. A crisis really is ‘creative destruction’ and an opportunity to do things you could never do before.” □

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