Preparing For The Worst:
The Importance of Crisis Leadership

“Always plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the ark.”
Richard C. Cushing

I had the opportunity to hear a presentation by Randy Dawes, the Director of Engineering at the Hyatt Regency New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. And his experiences have some valuable lessons for all leaders.

One the eve of Katrina’s arrival, hotel staff evacuated guests from 900 guestrooms, though 37 guests refused to go. In the early morning hours of August 29, 2005, Category 5 winds began blasting out the hotel’s windows.

The Hyatt Regency sustained massive damage from Katrina’s Category 5 winds. After most of its windows were shattered by 175 mph winds, significant water and debris was blown into guest rooms and the atrium lobby. As Dawes described it, “A Category 5 wind breaks everything.”

In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, Dawes and other hotel staff led 3,800 people (staff and their families, the 37 guests and stranded city residents) to safety in third-floor ballrooms. They played host for days through extreme heat, intermittent power and no running water.

In the following days, they orchestrated the delivery of provisions, and assisted the military in evacuating the adjacent Louisiana Superdome, which meant directing more than 25,000 desperate and weary New Orleans residents through the Hyatt to awaiting buses.

For the next three months the hotel provided operating space and meals for the mayor, fire and police personnel, the 911 service, the energy utility, the National Guard, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Army Corps of Engineers.

Though the property was extensively damaged (and has yet to reopen), Dawes was proud of the fact that there were no casualties at the Hyatt Regency: no injuries, no deaths.
After describing the situation they faced, Dawes provided some key learnings from Katrina:

**Crisis Planning is crucial:** The Hyatt Regency had a Disaster Plan in place, but it did not prepare them completely for Katrina’s wrath. Dawes put it this way: “Being prepared for disaster is one thing; Being prepared for Catastrophe is another.” Even so, though very little of what happened was in the Disaster Plan, Dawes said, “It prepared us to prepare for the worst.” As a result, the New Orleans Crisis Management Plan now contains much more quick reaction information.

The value of Crisis Planning is well-documented. But as Dawes pointed out, most doesn’t go far enough, focusing on the probable more than the possible.

Royal Dutch Shell has been a leader in Crisis Planning since the mid-1970’s. They routinely plan for worst-case scenarios, and to some, scenarios that have very little chance of ever occurring. But this willingness to look at everything that could impact their business has allowed them to respond quickly and efficiently when others have been seriously impacted.

The process of planning is the real value; having “what if?” conversations not only prepares you for specific situations, but also hones the strategic skills of the organization. It forces Leaders and others to get out of their normal thinking parameters, and that can pay off in crisis and non-crisis situations.

In the words of Dwight Eisenhower, “Plans are nothing; planning is everything.”

**Leaders must be the rock:** “We’ll all go through it together,” said Dawes. But everyone is looking to the leaders to set the tone. The Hyatt Regency leadership adopted an “attitude of hospitality” that spread to everyone in the hotel. And they prioritized issues and acted as quickly and decisively as possible.

In any situation, people want to follow their leader. Whether it’s normal day-to-day activities or when facing a crisis, it’s the leaders who to a large extent determine the success or failure of their people.

Creating the vision, setting the values, communicating with people...these are the primary activities for crisis leadership. And they are good touchstones for regular activities, too.
Talk to people every 30 minutes: One of the keys to their reaction to Katrina was to communicate completely and constantly. Every half hour they would tell people everything that was happening. According to Dawes, this minimized rumors, fear and anger.

Leaders are busy, and with everything facing them in a crisis situation, it can be easy to under-communicate, either in frequency or content. But when it comes to communication, more is better. Leaders can’t communicate too often or too much. Even if there is nothing new to report, communicate that. Stay in close touch with people, because in the absence of information, people make up their own...and it’s usually bad.

Thankfully, most of us will never face a situation like Dawes did. But we can learn from him and from others who have faced a crisis.

The challenge is to imagine the unimaginable: taking the time and effort to consider what we will do in a crisis. And then adopting and adapting in the moment.

The benefits will go far beyond responding to a difficult situation. Your organization will gain much from deciding now how you will lead...

...even if the crisis never happens.

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