

Leadership in a Fearful World

We are living in a fearful world. It is a world haunted by the menace of terrorism, threatened by insidious warfare. It is a world plagued by tsunamis, monster hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, severe drought, famine and raging wildfires. But these often take a back seat to fear right in our own neighborhood streets. What was once a place of commerce, transportation and community has become a war zone right outside our front doors. Children are often not safe in their classrooms, and sadly not even in their own homes.

Haunted by insecurity and upheaval, shadowed by dread, the world hungers for great leadership, for guidance and direction from those with cool heads and clear visions. If you are in a position of leadership, and very few of us are not, don't wait for a great leader to emerge. Great leaders are not born – they become. A great leader is one whose heart is transformed, often during times of great crisis. You can be the great leader to arise in your family, community or business setting.

Webster defines crisis as disordered function, a radical change of status, an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending; especially one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome.

With that definition in mind, handling crisis is no longer an option for any leader. Leaders must be prepared at all times to handle crisis and its outcomes at home, among friends and in the workplace. If that's a daunting possibility, be encouraged. You are far better prepared to be the instrument of peace in a critical situation than you realize. Keep these steps in mind.

- **Deal with yourself first.** You're no good to anyone if you're out of control. Deal with your own emotions, your immediate needs. As the airlines have been telling us for years, put the oxygen mask on yourself first, and then you can be available to those in need.
- **Tell the truth about the situation.** Use your good judgment to share what information is pertinent. It's not necessary to share all the gory details simply because they exist. The need to share sensational data will separate the leader from the limelight seeker.
- **Alleviate stress, as much as possible.** Provide a controlled atmosphere in which people can talk through their fears, where they can share what they have experienced and how they are feeling about it.
- **Authenticate the experience.** Don't try to talk people out of their emotions; don't comment and by all means, don't judge. Hear them out; acknowledge them and then be prepared to help them move forward.
- **Provide an opportunity to move forward to normal operation.** Though true normalcy may not be possible for some time, realize what will be necessary to return to a degree of normal functioning and facilitate it.
- **Recognize and deal with the acute reaction.** Be prepared to employ professionals to assess those whose reactions seem to be severe, situations in which the individuals may be a potential danger to themselves or to others.
- **Provide resources 24/7.** From toiletries for those displaced by a tornado to a forum for sharing memories about a deceased comrade, the great leader will see through the eyes of need and provide whatever will help the victimized begin to feel empowered once more.
- **Don't ever promise what you can't deliver.** But don't hesitate to promise what you know you can. In times of crisis, people will hang onto whatever is offered. As a leader, you are bound to make your offers concrete and be prepared to stand behind them, at all costs.
- **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Keep all lines of communication open and flowing. Repeat each communiqué over and over. Ears in crisis may not hear

what's being said until the fourth or fifth telling. And remember that it goes two ways. Listening is equally as important as imparting information. Be willing to hear the same story until it no longer needs to be told.

Comfort comes in all shapes and sizes. Great leaders often look a lot like grandmothers with comfy laps or paramedics who dispense teddy bears with ambulance rides, or neighbors who make their homes available at a moment's notice.

Great leaders are those who establish and insure order. They guide and teach and protect. They provide tools; they counsel, arbitrate and shield. They comfort and nurture and encourage. And when the time is right they will even prod. Whatever the title they bear, if they are accomplishing these things, they have transformed hearts and they have become leaders. The need is great and they are very precious to us in these times. Be among them. Remember it's not what you do; it's what you become!

Note: For more information or to arrange for formal training in crisis response procedures, contact the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF), The American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC), the American Red Cross or your local disaster response coordinator.

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