

The New Leader's 100-Hour Action Plan – Leading through a Crisis

Disciplined Iteration

*The New Leader's 100-Day Action Plan*ⁱ is a sequential methodology for leaders and their teams to get done in **100-days** what normally takes 6-12 months. In a crisis or disaster, this time frame is woefully inadequate as teams need a way to get done in **100-hours** what normally takes weeks or months. This requires an iterative instead of sequential approach. That way follows.

Start with the basic premise that leadership is about inspiring and enabling others. Enhance that with Leonard Lodish's idea that "It is better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong"ⁱⁱ. Then add Darwin's point that "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."ⁱⁱⁱ Add it all up and you get leading through a crisis being about inspiring and enabling others to get things vaguely right quickly, and then adapt along the way - with clarity around direction, leadership and roles.

This plays out in three steps of a disciplined iteration in line with the overall purpose:

- 1) **PREPARE IN ADVANCE:** The better you have anticipated possible scenarios, the more prepared you are, the more confidence you will have when crises strike.
- 2) **REACT TO EVENTS:** The reason you prepared is so that you all can react quickly and flexibility to the situation you face. Don't over-think this. Do what you prepared to do.
- 3) **BRIDGE THE GAPS.** In a crisis, there is inevitably a gap between the desired and current state of affairs. Rectify that by bridging those gaps in the:
 - Situation - implementing a response to the current crisis
 - Response - improving capabilities to respond to future crises
 - Prevention - reducing the risk of future crises happening in the first place

Along the way, keep the ultimate purpose in mind. It needs to inform and frame everything you do over the short, mid and long term as you lead through a crisis instead of merely out of a crisis. Crises change your organization. Be sure the choices you make during crises change you in ways that move you towards your purpose and not away from your core vision and values.

PREPARE IN ADVANCE

One life squad ran a drill in conjunction with fire and police departments. It involved a car running off the road and down an embankment. The squad had to get down the embankment, treat urgent trauma, and package the victims for the fire department to lift out of the ditch and load into ambulances. 20 minutes into the drill was this exchange:

"Where's my baby?"

"Your daughters are in the other ambulance."

*"But where's my **BABY**?"*

Turned out that in addition to the four adults and teenagers, there was another victim. Lesson learned: Make sure you account for all victims. (Note that the lesson learned was not "In drills with cars and embankments, watch out for plastic dolls hidden in bushes so you don't get embarrassed on video in front of the fire and police departments and mayor." Though we did learn that as well.)

Preparing in advance is about building general capabilities and capacity - not specific situational knowledge. For the most part, there is a finite set of the most likely, most devastating types of crises and disasters that are worth preparing for. Think them through. Run the drills. Capture the general lessons so people can apply them flexibly to the specific situations they encounter.^{iv} Have resources ready to be deployed when those disasters strike.

REACT TO EVENTS

Our fight or flight instincts evolved to equip us for moments like this. If the team has the capabilities and capacity in place, turn it loose to respond to the events. This is where all the hard work of preparation pays off.

BRIDGE THE GAPS

While first responders should react in line with their training, keep in mind that random, instinctual, uncoordinated actions by multiple groups exacerbate chaos. Stopping everything until excruciatingly detailed situation assessments have been fed into excruciatingly detailed plans that get approved by excruciatingly excessive layers of management leads to things happening too late. The preferred methodology for what Harrauld calls the “integration” phase is to pause to accelerate, get thinking and plans vaguely right quickly, and then get going to bridge the gaps.^v

Situational questions (Keeping in mind the physical, political, emotional context)

- What do we know, and not know about what happened and its impact (facts)?
- What are the implications of what we know and don't know (conclusions)?
- What do we predict may happen (scenarios)?
- What resources and capabilities do we have at our disposal (assets)? Gaps?
- What aspects of the situation can we turn to our advantage?

Objectives and Intent

Armed with answers to those questions, think through and choose the situational objectives and intent. What are the desired outcomes of leading through the crisis? What is the desired end-state? This is a critical component of direction and a big deal.

For example, when a glass water bottle capper went bad, grinding screw top threads into glass chips, the objective and intent were 1) stop the damage and 2) protect the brand.

Priorities

The Red Cross provides relief to victims of disasters. In doing that, the prioritization of shelter, food, water, medicine and emotional support varies by the type of disaster. If someone's home is destroyed by a fire in the winter, shelter takes precedence. On the other hand, if a reservoir gets contaminated, the critical priority is getting people clean water.

These examples illustrate the importance of thinking through the priorities for each individual situation – and each stage of a developing crisis. The choices for isolating, containing, controlling and stabilizing the immediate situation likely will be different than the priorities for the mid-term response, getting resources in the right place and then delivering the required support over time. Those in turn will be different from the priorities involved in repairing the damage from the crisis or disaster and preventing its reoccurrence.

Get the answer to the question, “where do we focus our efforts first?” and the priority choices clear. And get them communicated to all, perhaps starting with a set of meetings to:

- Recap current situation and needs, and what has already been accomplished
- Agree objectives, intent, priorities and phasing of priorities
- Agree action plans, milestones, role sort, communication points, plans and protocols

These are the same building blocks discussed in *The New Leader's 100-Day Action Plan*. However, a crisis is better managed by using an iterative approach than by using the more sequential approach laid out in that book. This is why we recommend early meetings to jump-start strategic, operational, and organizational processes all at the same time, getting things vaguely right quickly and then adapting to new information along the way.

Bridge the gap between the desired and current state.

Support team members in implementing plans while gathering more information concurrently.

Complete situation assessment and mid-term prioritization and plans.

Conduct milestone update sessions daily or more frequently as appropriate.

- Update progress on action plans with focus on wins, learning, areas needing help
- Update situation assessment
- Adjust plans iteratively, reinforcing the expectation of continuous adjustment.

Over-communicate at every step of the way to all the main constituencies. Your message and main communication points will evolve as the situation and your information about the situation evolve. This makes the need that much greater for frequent communication updates within the organization, with partner organizations and the public. Funneling as much as possible through one spokesperson will reduce misinformation. Do not underestimate the importance of this.

First officer Jeff Skiles was the “pilot in charge” of the airplane that took off, ran into a flock of birds, and lost both its engines. At that point, Captain Chesley Sullenberger chose to take over. With his “My aircraft”, followed by Jeff’s “Your aircraft”, command was passed to “Sully” who safely landed the plane on the Hudson River. Only one pilot can be in charge at a time. Two people trying to steer the same plane at the same time simply does not work.

The same is true for crisis and disaster management. Only one person can be the “pilot in charge” of any effort or component at a time. A critical part of implementation is clarifying and re-clarifying who is doing what, and who is making what decisions at what point – especially as changing conditions dictate changes in roles and decision making authority within and across organizations. Make sure the hand-offs are as clean as the one on Sully and Skiles’ flight.

Bridge the gaps between desired and current response and desired and most recent crisis prevention (improving things and reducing risks for the future)

At the end of the crisis, conduct an after action review looking at:

- What actually happened? How did that compare with what we expected to happen?
- What impact did we have? How did that compare with our objectives?
- What did we do particularly effectively that we should do again?
- What can we do even better the next time in terms of risk mitigation and response?

Summary

Leading through a crisis is about inspiring and enabling others to get things vaguely right quickly and adapt iteratively along the way – with clear direction, leadership and roles. Three steps:

1. **Prepare in advance** – Preparation breeds confidence. Think through your own crisis management protocols. Pre-position resources. ID and train crisis management teams.
2. **React to events** – Leverage that preparation to respond quickly and flexibly in the moment. This requires courage on the part of management to let people do what they prepared to do without a lot of over-supervision early on. However, it is important to instill an “ask for help early”, rather than a “wait until we are overwhelmed” attitude in the responders.^{vi}
3. **Bridge the gaps** between desired and current situation, response capabilities, and prevention, supporting team members in implementing purpose-driven, priority-focused plans while gathering more information concurrently.

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George was educated at Harvard and Wharton and is co-author of three books on onboarding published by John Wiley & Sons: *The New Leader’s 100-Day Action Plan*, *Onboarding*, and *The Total Onboarding Program*.
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100-HOUR ACTION PLAN – Tool A3.4b – Bridge the Gap

ORGANIZATION’S PURPOSE: _____

UPDATE:

Wins - Share and celebrate the good things that have already happened _____

Learning - Share learning that can help others _____

Help – Highlight areas needing more support _____

PHYSICAL, POLITICAL, EMOTIONAL CONTEXT:

What do we know, and not know about what happened and its impact (facts)? _____

What are the implications of what we know and don’t know (conclusions)? _____

What do we predict may happen (scenarios)? _____

What resources and capabilities do we have at our disposal (assets)? Gaps? _____

What aspects of the situation can we turn to our advantage? _____

SITUATIONAL OBJECTIVES AND INTENT:

PRIORITY 1: _____ Leader: _____

ACTIONS: _____ When: _____ Who: _____

ACTIONS: _____ When: _____ Who: _____

ACTIONS: _____ When: _____ Who: _____

PRIORITY 2: _____ Leader: _____

ACTIONS: _____ When: _____ Who: _____

ACTIONS: _____ When: _____ Who: _____

ACTIONS: _____ When: _____ Who: _____

PRIORITY 3: _____ Leader: _____

ACTIONS: _____ When: _____ Who: _____

ACTIONS: _____ When: _____ Who: _____

ACTIONS: _____ When: _____ Who: _____

COMMUNICATION:

PRIMARY SPOKESPERSON: _____ BACKUP: _____

MESSAGE: _____

COMMUNICATION POINTS: 1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

PROTOCOLS:

NEXT TEAM CALL/MEETING: _____

EXCEPTION GUIDELINES: _____

TOOL A3.4B – BRIDGE THE GAP – GUIDE

This provides guidance on completing and using this tool. Recall the three steps of crisis management: 1 – Prepare in advance, 2 – React to events, 3 – Bridge the gaps. This tool focuses on bridging the gaps between the desired and current state in the current crisis.

ORGANIZATION’S PURPOSE:

Begin by recapping the organization’s purpose to give everyone the same long-term view.

UPDATE:

Start each meeting by “going around the table” with BRIEF updates from team members on wins, learning, and help they need.

PHYSICAL, POLITICAL, EMOTIONAL CONTEXT:

Context is key. Complete as soon as practical and then update as things change – which they will.

- What do we know, and not know about what happened and its impact? (These are facts, data, things everyone looking at sees the same way.)
- What are the implications of what we know and don’t know? (These conclusions are your opinions, drawn from the facts.)
- What do we predict may happen? (Since you don’t know what will happen, lay out a couple of possible scenarios.)
- What resources and capabilities do we have at our disposal? Gaps? (These are your assets, both already deployed and available to be deployed, as well as holes you need to fill.)
- What aspects of the situation can we turn to our advantage? (This gets at resources that can be reallocated from other parts of your organization or other organizations, or opportunities created by the crisis. Look back at the organization’s purpose for guidance here.)

SITUATIONAL OBJECTIVES AND INTENT:

This is about defining what is required to bridge the gap between the desired and current state in the current crisis. “Intent” gets at why that’s important. For example, when a glass water bottle capper went bad, grinding screw top threads into glass chips, the objective and intent were 1) stop the damage and 2) protect the brand.

PRIORITIES:

Be clear on whether your three priorities cut across all scenarios or whether they are options to pursue depending upon which scenario unfolds. As you get new information, your priorities may change. Either way, each priority needs a single, accountable leader.

Then lay out the actions for each priority, with timing and a single, accountable leader for each action.

COMMUNICATION:

Identify the primary spokesperson and back up, along with core message and three communication points.

PROTOCOLS:

End each meeting with agreement on when you’ll meet again and how people should deal with surprises between the meetings. There will be surprises.

ⁱ *The New Leader's 100-Day Action Plan*, Bradt, Check, Pedraza, Wiley, 2009

ⁱⁱ Professor Leonard Lodish - lecture at the University of Pennsylvania, Wharton School, 1984

ⁱⁱⁱ Attributed to Charles Darwin

^{iv} John Harrauld argues the need for both discipline (structure, doctrine, process) and agility (creativity, improvisation, adaptability) in "Agility and Discipline: Critical Success Factors for Disaster Response", *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 2006; 604; 256

^v Harrauld *ibid*

^{vi} Chris Saeger – discussion at American Red Cross, May, 2010