

# CRISIS LEADERSHIP, CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP AND THE CORONAVIRUS EPIDEMIC

Every once in a while you get an 'I've never been through this before' moment in your leadership, and the current coronavirus phenomenon is one of them.

My guess is there is nothing in your leadership past that is quite like the current COVID-19 pandemic. I led through SARS in 2003, but this has eclipsed anything that happened during SARS with national borders being locked down, travel being impacted, empty stadiums, canceled seasons and daily life changing rapidly.

The question is how to respond as a leader.

When circumstances are changing daily, even hourly, here are a few broader principles that I hope can guide you as a leader that I'm trying to bear in mind as well.

## **1. PRACTICE LEADERSHIP, NOT REACTIONSHIP**

The weird thing about leadership is you have all the emotions anyone else does during a crisis. You're thinking about your own health, your family, your own freedoms and your own fears.

Plus, you're responsible for the weight of your entire church or organization, which adds a burden that's difficult to describe unless you've carried it.

As you can see in the stock markets and crazy irrational stockpiling of necessities that borders an absolute panic, fear, greed and selfishness wreak havoc on our life together.

***That's not leadership, that's reactionship.***

Your job isn't just to react to what's happening, it's to lead people in light of what's happening.

That means you need to check your emotions and do what's best for others, not just you.

Trust me, if your church or organization sees panic or stupid denial in your eyes, it fuels the panic in theirs.

Your jokes on social about how much toilet paper you've stockpiled, or, alternatively, that this isn't any worse than the seasonal flu, or whatever cheap social media theory you're peddling undermines their confidence in you.

***Too many leaders practice reactionship in crisis, not leadership. Your job isn't just to react to what's happening, it's to lead people in light of what's happening.***

## **2. EMBRACE SACRIFICE, NOT SELFISHNESS**

Perhaps the thing that disappoints me most, both in myself and in the things I see via social, is the profound selfishness that Christians are displaying in the midst of a crisis.

I feel all those instincts too, and I realize they're wrong.

It's easy to spot selfishness in other people. A crisis simply reveals and amplifies what's already there. For too many of us, that's selfishness and self-righteousness.

I need to remind myself that the early church wasn't known for stockpiling ample food and supplies for themselves and spreading fear on social media. Mother Teresa's legacy wasn't built on hoarding months of supplies for herself and asking the poor of Calcutta why weren't they as wise and smart as she was.

***The early church wasn't known for stockpiling ample food and supplies for themselves and spreading fear on social media.***

You know this...the best leaders show sacrifice in times of crisis, not selfishness. The sacrifice you show as a leader will bring out the sacrifice in others. Unfortunately, so will the selfishness. I'm not saying you shouldn't feed your family or wash your hands thoroughly and often. I'm doing both. But that can't be your only or primary response.

Mother Teresa's legacy wasn't built on hoarding months of supplies for herself and asking the poor of Calcutta why weren't they as wise and smart as she was.

The world sometimes gets the Gospel better than pastors do. They celebrate people who give their lives in service of others. Historically, so do we. Self-protection and self-defense may be some other religion. It's not Christianity.

***The best leaders show sacrifice in times of crisis, not selfishness. The sacrifice you show as a leader will bring out the sacrifice in others. Unfortunately, so will the selfishness.***

### **3. GATHER WISE COUNSEL TO CHECK YOUR NATURAL INSTINCTS**

I realize it sounds axiomatic to say you shouldn't over or under react, but almost no one gets this right by nature: you have a natural bias to overreaction or under-reaction.

The key is to know your bias. And, my guess is that you overreact to certain triggers and underreact to others.

Naturally, I'm not fear-driven so when a crisis like this happens, I definitely tilt toward under-reaction. To be honest, I'm shocked at how rapidly this has spread and how much disruption it's fueled in such a short period of time.

Literally, the first week the new coronavirus was announced at the beginning of 2020, I was pulled aside by a higher ranking health care official I trust and told that this would be bigger than SARS and could infect tens of millions of people. He had access to information on government and health channels I didn't.

***I hoped he was wrong. Now it appears he was very correct.***

Social media is proving almost singularly unhelpful in providing reliable information on the pandemic, and the mainstream media (which I am generally not a critic of...I shudder to think about a world without it) has been impacted by the need for clicks in the attention economy.

It's ironic that in an age of unprecedented access to information, during a crisis, thanks to social media, most of what you get is misinformation, hysteria and disinformation.

I suppose that shouldn't be surprising. It's always been said that truth is the first casualty of war.

So what do you do?

I would gather the smartest, most informed people you know with actual experience in healthcare and let them advise you. Let them tell you which sources are most reliable.

On your little advisory team, I would also gather a few people who are wiser and smarter than you in both leadership and communication and work on your communication together.

You will likely have to reach beyond both your staff and board to do this, although you will likely pull one or two from that group to help. Think of it like a war cabinet or special committee of especially wise people who are there to inform you during the crisis.

This team will help you both gather accurate information and make informed decisions. You may even want to try to get a local politician or civic official who's well-informed to advise you.

In the meantime, unfollow the extremists online in either camp. The senseless noise will make it even harder for you to think, pray and form an opinion.

And to gather counsel outside your immediate personal network, follow, highlight, and track people in the community and in ministry you may not know but respect, follow and trust and who have led wisely in past situations.

This will help focus and clear your mind and heart.

***It's ironic that in an age of unprecedented access to information, during a crisis—thanks to social media—most of what you get is misinformation, hysteria and disinformation.***

#### **4. COMMUNICATE CLEARLY**

Once you've met with your wise counsel, plan your communication and action plan. Again, most leaders tilt toward saying too much or too little. Here's a pattern that's helped me communicating during a crisis:

***Acknowledge the problem.*** People need to know you know, so you might say, "As you know, we're in a situation none of us have been in before and things are changing day by day."

***Acknowledge both sides.*** I'm sure in the upcoming weeks outside of government directives, some churches will decide to shut down or go online. Others will continue to meet as long as they're allowed. Acknowledging that both are options gives you more credibility, not less. Saying something like, "We've seen some organizations close. Others stay open. And both are options." Too often you'll be tempted to pretend like your option is the only option. That actually just makes you look stupid. Of course, there's more than one option, and your people know that.

***Be clear about your decision.*** State the option you've selected. For example, "We decided to stay open this weekend...and here's how it will work..."

***Tell people why.*** This is the most important thing you can do. Whether you're open or closed is less important than why you're open or closed. After all, people don't buy what you do. They buy why you do it (thank you, Simon Sinek).

***Point to hope.*** Because it's a crisis, you're probably delivering news you don't want to deliver. What you have to remember is that your job is to see the future and lead people there. There will be a time when the crisis passes, you'll be around for all of it, and you need to point to hope.

If you want to see a great example of crisis leadership in a different context, follow Kevin Queen and the team at Cross Point Church in Nashville whose building was severely damaged by the tornadoes in Nashville in March 2020. As tough as the situation is, they're helping their city and pointing to hope all the while rebuilding their church. I love the Gospel instincts of Kevin and his team. Kevin, by the way, has mainly asked people to help rebuild the city.

***Whether you're open or closed is less important than WHY you're open or closed. After all, people don't buy what you do. They buy why you do it.***

#### **5. STOP THE SPIN**

You are going to be so tempted to spin the truth to your side. Don't. This is a complex situation and the truth is most of us don't really know how long this is going to last, how much damage will be done or what will happen.

Plus, you have a vested interest in this. Churches don't want to run out of people and money. Businesses don't want to go bankrupt. People don't want to lose their life savings. So you'll be tempted to put a spin on events so that things work out in your favor.

I've also seen people try to use the crisis to justify their right or left political leanings. Uh...no. All of that is just really bad leadership. ***Crises are human, not partisan.***

One of the best ways to combat this is to simply do what's best for others. If you love the people you serve, help the people you serve and lead the people you serve, they'll rally around you. Honestly, they will. If you try to manipulate them, control them or use them, the smart ones will smell that out and leave.

***Spin and sin are closely related. Remember that.***

***Grace and truth will get you through this. Stay tethered to those.***

## **6. LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITY IN THE MIDST OF ALL THE OBSTACLES**

Leaders find opportunity where others only see obstacles.

There are opportunities here. I left this one until the end because some of you (talking to myself here as well) would be tempted to gloss over the crisis and not see opportunity, but it is there.

Five years ago, I realized I needed a visa to do more of the work I wanted to do in the US. They're not easy to get. It led me to think about how I could deliver content without having to jump on a plane every time.

I had also been wanting to write a book but my schedule was full, so in light of these two obstacles (uncertain travel and the lack of full margin to write a book), I created my first online course.

I had no idea that I was running headlong into one of the best ways to serve leaders I've discovered to date.

The appetite for online courses was much bigger than I thought, and I've been able to help thousands of leaders I wouldn't otherwise have helped plus been able to significantly improve all the things I do for leaders as a result.

But that's wasn't some grand design. It was simply a response to a problem I didn't really know how to solve. (By the way, I did get the visa and can now do both...a wonderful surprise.)

**So what are some opportunities in front of us? I'll just list a few I see:**

### **Improve Your Digital /Online Experience**

You've known for a long time that your online experience needs to improve. Now's the time to act.

Sink more time and attention to connecting with people virtually, and you will be able to lead them regardless of how you're able to meet in person.

Whether it's your only venue in the upcoming months or not, digital is here to stay. And when people can gather again, many will come running back. There's nothing quite like face to face, especially after it gets threatened and taken away.

**Help Your City...**In a moment where everyone's obsessed with themselves, look for new ways to serve others. When the people in your city see that you care, it will remind them that God does too.

**Broker Hope...**People's spiritual instincts and questions get triggered in moments like these. Give them the Good News of the Gospel. A world struggling with death needs both the hope of resurrection and the power of a God who suffers with them. The appetite for the Gospel has been whetted like it hasn't been in years. ***A generation that's sick of hype is ready for hope.***

**Deepen Trust...**One way or another, this crisis will pass. If you embrace humble, sensible, Godly leadership during it, you'll have so much trust in the bank with the people you lead that the future will indeed be much greater than the past.

Having been together through a crisis, you'll be able to tackle so much more together in the future.

***You'll spot a lot of other opportunities as well. I promise you they're there.***