



# THE INITIATIVES GROUP

## Leading in Crisis

### Phase I: Internal Actions

*Before you do anything else, you must first prepare yourself mentally. These are the critical and often ignored steps that will set you up to succeed.*

**1. Calm yourself.** When crisis strikes, the natural emotional response is stress. When we are stressed, our pre-frontal cortex – the part of the brain responsible for rational thought and decision making – is disengaged. It is essential to manage your stress and get your emotions under control to allow your pre-frontal cortex to come back online. Taking time to gather yourself will allow you to view the situation through an objective lens, rather than a lens of fear or anxiety.

**2. Take time to think and gain clarity.** Once you are under control, ask yourself three questions: What's happening? What's not happening? How can I influence the situation? This is your opportunity to gather your thoughts, determine what's going on, and brainstorm what you might do to solve the problems at hand.

**3. Reflect on your values.** This is a time when you are vulnerable to compromise what you believe in and stand for. In the face of adversity, there is a tendency to brush aside commitments to honesty, trust, respect, empathy, integrity, loyalty, teamwork, selflessness, commitment, responsibility, service, etc. Reflect on what matters most to you and your organization and, no matter what, don't compromise on doing what's right. Thinking about your personal and organizational values on a consistent basis will make this process easier and lead to good judgment in times of crisis.

### Phase II: Initial External Actions

*Once you are composed and clear on your values, begin to interact with the team to solve the problem or improve the situation. The end state of this phase is a calm and cohesive environment, a plan of action, and a sense of hope that the problem can and will be solved.*

**4. Instill calm.** Just as you calmed yourself, you must now calm the team. Let people know that you appreciate the severity of the situation, but through the tone of your voice and through your composure, assure the group that they can and will get through this difficulty. Help your team to reduce their stress levels by encouraging them to take the necessary time to gather themselves. Instilling calm is a continuous process throughout crisis situations. Fear and anxiety

can quickly spread from one person to the entire team and it is a leader's responsibility to keep his or her finger on the pulse and adjust accordingly.

**5. Gain and maintain situational awareness.** There will be a lot of things happening simultaneously. It is essential to create a system to process and understand the information you have and acquire the information you need. This is when you work with others to try and figure out what's actually happening and why.

**6. Determine action, prioritize action, and take action.** Adverse situations can paralyze people. Calmly start determining what needs to be done, quickly prioritize, and initiate the first steps. By taking action in a positive direction, all involved will relax and settle.

**7. Increase communications.** When unfavorable situations arise, people tend to stop communicating. During a crisis, you need to make a concerted effort not only to communicate, but to communicate *more*. Create systems to periodically update your group on what is going on. Tell your team how important it is that they keep you informed on what's happening in their area. When information is lacking, people make erroneous assumptions that can have significant consequences. By increasing communications – both to the leader and from the leader - you maintain situational awareness while continuing to calm and reassure the team.

**8. Be visible.** The presence of the leader within the environment shows commitment and confidence. It allows you to lead by example and show your team that you are just as much a part of the fight. People want to look in your eyes and see your sense of calm. When you are not present, people wonder where you are and what's going on. Don't be a leader who is missing in action!

**9. Foster Cohesion.** Divisive conflict may emerge and teams can quickly fragment under the pressure of the situation. It is essential that you quickly identify and address potential conflicts and focus on sustaining unity and cohesion. Emphasize that the only way through the crisis is to work together and not against each other.

**10. Inspire hope.** When crisis strikes or when the circumstances look bleak, people have a tendency to give up or half heartedly continue the fight. As the leader, one of your most important tasks is to keep this from happening. If you have successfully executed the previous steps, the group should be receptive to words of inspiration. This message of hope must be shared in your own personal style with total sincerity, authenticity, and confidence.

### **Phase III: Continuing Actions**

*Once the initial stage of the crisis has been addressed and immediate action is ongoing, the leader can begin to take the steps necessary to sustain the effort over time. The following actions support the ongoing activities and position the leader to assess and adjust the plan as required.*

**11. Assess and adjust the plan.** You and your team must know that during a crisis, the plan rarely goes as expected. If you know this from the beginning, you will be inherently more flexible and will be ready to respond to unexpected situations and make the necessary

adjustments. The better you get at making these adjustments or changes, the better your chances of sustaining momentum and accomplishing your mission. This is when you figure out which of your efforts are working, which are not working, and why.

**12. Manage expectations and plan for continuing operations.** Responding to crisis and solving problems takes time. Anticipate that you will be dealing with this issue for a while and plan accordingly. It almost always takes longer than expected. Turning a crisis around will take a tremendous effort by all involved. It will probably impact and upset other aspects of your environment and life. If you understand this, plan for it, and clearly communicate it to your team, you will mentally adjust to the marathon you are running.

**13. Show compassion and empathy.** In times of crisis, it is not only the organization that faces an uncertain future, but the individuals within the organization, as well. It is imperative for a leader to show compassion and empathy to all members of the team. Assure them that you are always keeping their best interests at the very top of your mind. Do what you can to help them solve the problems that have come up as a result of the situation. How you respond to these personal issues is directly related to your reflection on your values from Phase I.

**14. Analyze, learn, and improve.** Adversity can be a powerful catalyst for new ideas, creative thinking, open-mindedness, and unexpected growth. As possible, leverage this opportunity to learn and develop, build a stronger and more cohesive team, and think innovatively. Take time to identify and learn from the mistakes that were made and create new procedures and systems for the future – including how you will respond when the next crisis inevitably strikes.



*The Initiatives Group is a management consulting firm that specializes in data-driven leadership and teamwork development programs. For over 20 years, the firm has been assessing, advising, and developing world-class leaders across the globe.*

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