

The 5 Phases of Leading Through a Crisis

By Kevin J. Delaney

September 23, 2022 12:07 PM EDT

Source: <https://time.com/charter/6216047/prepared-leader-erika-james-lynn-wooten/>

What have we learned about leading organizations through crisis?

That's an essential question to ask as we take stock of the societal upheaval triggered by the pandemic.

Erika H. James, the dean of the Wharton School, and Lynn Perry Wooten, the president of Simmons University, set out to answer it in their book *The Prepared Leader*, which was released this week. James and Wooten, specialists in crisis leadership and management strategy, both assumed their current posts in July 2020, and draw on that personal experience and their academic research to provide their advice.

Put simply, their argument is that leaders who best navigate crises are open-minded and informed by diverse sources, trusting and empowering of their teams, humble and deferring to expertise, communicating transparently and inspiring, and continuously learning before, during, and after each crisis.

Crises are inevitable, though natural human cognitive biases often lead us to underestimate their likelihood or impact. "We do not ordinarily plan for the atypical, the anomalous, the irregular, or the exceptional on a day-to-day basis," James and Wooten write. "We are hardwired to neglect the possibility of a crisis." (p. 6) They argue that you can overcome those blindspots through preparation.

Crises play out in five distinct phases, according to James and Wooten, with certain leadership competencies that you can develop for each:

1. Early warning/signal detection. This phase requires sense-making and perspective-taking. When something looks wrong, ask whether the warning signs could under any circumstances develop into a problem and, if yes, what you could do about it now. This early phase also requires having diverse voices and sources of information so you can see the big picture.
2. Preparation and prevention. This phase is about proactively trying to prevent a crisis or limit its impact. Leaders are most successful when they have influence within their teams, nurture organizational agility, and deploy creativity. Influence comes from cultivating the trust and transparency that are key to inspiring colleagues to action. Empowering others to respond and change course as needed makes organizations agile. Creativity allows you to imagine new solutions, as the NBA did with its successful “bubble” approach to finishing its season during the summer of 2020.
3. Damage containment. When the crisis has struck, prepared leaders use effective communication and iterative risk-taking to limit the damage. Communication is most effective when it conveys urgency and purpose amid uncertainty, while being transparent. To emerge from a crisis, “you are going to have to take risks at a moment when you will want to take them least,” James and Wooten write. (p. 37)
4. Recovery. This phase requires resilience. “Promoting resilience is about empowering your people,” the authors write. “It’s about giving them the autonomy, opportunity, and support to grow, learn, experiment, make decisions and pursue courses of action with confidence. Promoting resilience is also about diversity of perspective. It’s about building teams with different experience and expertise and ensuring that diverse perspectives are welcomed, valued, and shared proactively.” (p. 39)
5. Learning and reflection. This phase is the most important, because it allows you to better lead through future crises, James and Wooten argue. “We believe learning is what will empower you to fully leverage your agency to spot the signs of the next crisis coming your way, be ready for it, minimize the damage it might cause, and accelerate your

recovery into new opportunities,” they write. (p. 124) They endorse “vicarious learning,” as well, saying it’s critical for leaders to draw lessons from the experiences of others—such as by reading case studies and looking outside of their company or sector—to flesh out their understanding of issues.

Throughout the book, James and Wooten provide incisive questions to ask yourself about your leadership and organization. While simple, the 27 questions in chapter three are perhaps the most valuable material in the book. They include “Do you currently have access to diverse voices and sources of information within your team or organization?” (p. 32) and “What are some examples of mistakes you or your team have made during a crisis, and how did you respond to them?” (p. 38)

“No one person has all the knowledge or complete skill set to manage the complexity and the relentlessness of a crisis,” the authors write. (p. 54) They propose four steps for building a team to lead in a crisis:

- Compose your team. “Be diverse, strategic and inclusive in your thinking” and draw talent from all over the organization, they advise. (p. 60)
- Establish purpose and accountability. State the team’s purpose and set goals to be assessed and revised as needed.
- Create the culture. “Be empathic, welcoming, open, and tolerant of failure and complexity,” James and Wooten write. (p. 61) They cite the use of hackathons by teams of medical professionals in the UK in 2020 to spur ideas for managing the health-care challenges of the pandemic.
- Empower your team. This involves being transparent, agile, and open to delegating decision-making.

James and Wooten note that the best crisis leaders defer to expertise. Doing so provides faster access to broader information and signals to others they can look widely for inputs as well. “You may also need to know when it’s time to step back and allow others to showcase that expertise—to step up and take the lead when necessary,” they write. (p. 63)

To be sure:

- The book lacks sufficient case studies, in-the-war-room decision-making narratives, or in-depth examples—disappointing given the authors’ belief in vicarious learning. Much of the material about specific leaders—such as NBA commissioner Adam Silver—appears taken from press reports, rather than any original interviews with them.
- The chapters about globalized crises and the role of technology make obvious points about the complexity and accelerants of crises.
- The section in chapter four about different ways of framing crises—through primarily design, political, human resources, or cultural lenses—is thought-provoking, but lacks examples or sufficient development for a reader to fully understand their applications and significance.

Choice quotes:

- “We can prepare our leadership, our organizations, our systems, and our processes to withstand crises, whatever they are, whenever they strike.” (p. xiii)
- “If you frame a crisis as an opportunity, you are more likely to make decisions that entail risk. You will probably invest time and resources even when there is no absolute guarantee of return. Faced with an opportunity, you are more inclined to prioritize gain over loss and achievement over failure.” (p. 45)
- “What the Covid pandemic taught us is that we didn’t need more bureaucrats when a crisis struck. In this crisis, the critical skills—the people we needed to come to the fore—were those on the front line; the people who actually run the services, and who really understand what it takes to deliver those services when time and resources are scarce, and the odds are hugely stacked against you.” (p. 59)
- “You’re actually better off looking at similar instances where someone has failed to get something done and use this kind of broader stroke learning for insights into what you might want to do—or not want to do.” —University of Illinois researcher Gary Hecht (p. 118)
- “Perhaps most of all, being a Prepared Leader means being disposed to learn and

creating a learning orientation within your organization. It means setting up the systems and the protocols to capture learnings at an individual and systemic level—and convert that learning into your systems and processes.” (p. 120)

The bottom line is that *The Prepared Leader* is a welcome argument for open-minded, empowering, transparent, empathic, and learning leadership practices. Readers would have benefited from more in-depth examples and original reporting, but the questions James and Wooten provide throughout are valuable.

You can order *The Prepared Leader* at Bookshop.org or Amazon. (We may earn a commission if you purchase a book.)