

Leading through topsy-turvy times

Eric McNulty challenges us to reconsider how we think about future crises, saying that the trio of tenets – trust, adaptive capacity and resilience – are key players as complex, novel incidents increase in scale and frequency

Floods. Drought. Fires. Infectious disease. Grid failure. Canal jam. Civil unrest. The list goes on. A catalogue of the calamities of the past two years suggests that the word ‘normal’ should be banished from the lexicon. The underlying causes, climate change and an increasingly interconnected world chief among them, are not likely to abate in the foreseeable future. The forecast, then, is for increasing and sustained turbulence in the years ahead.

While there are numerous efforts underway to understand and change what we do, the most appropriate place to start is how we think. Many principles underlying emergency management and crisis leadership are implicitly rooted in assumptions of relative stability, punctuated by inflection points of disaster. Chaos is seen as an aberration, not the norm. What is needed now is a mindset purpose-built for the pervasive ambiguity and tumult that will define the coming decades.

I frame this mental model as the ART of crisis leadership, focusing on adaptive capacity, resilience, and trust. These three interdependent and overlapping tenets can help catalyse rapid evolution of policy and practice, from preparation through to recovery, in this new reality. Trust opens a willingness to change and undergirds the physical and mental strength to rebound from repeated shocks.

Islands of certainty

First of the tenets is adaptive capacity. The starting point is to begin speaking of change as constant. It is not a six-month initiative or a stepwise programme. Change is a feature, not a bug, of the system in which leaders and their teams must operate. By articulating change as the norm, one resets the expectations of stakeholders. Changing becomes a skill to master rather a threat to deny, resist or outwait. A leader’s emphasis on the constancy of change is an opportunity to focus on its benefits rather than its costs.

Simultaneously, the leader should address that which will not change, often values or core operating principles. Saying – and demonstrating – that you steadfastly put people first, for example, or manage incidents using the incident command system (ICS) or a similar structure, creates islands of certainty amid the turmoil of disruption. Giving people some solid ground on which to plant their feet makes it easier for them to confront chaos swirling around them.

Resilience is a popular buzzword, though its meaning is often fuzzy in application. That is not surprising given that psychologists, engineers and environmental scientists all use the term differently. For my purposes, I define it as the ability to bounce forward through

adversity with confidence in the future. It is dependent upon mental grit and robustly built and natural systems. Perhaps most importantly for leaders, resilience has both individual and social components. Shunting it off as something for each person to address on their own injects fragility into the system. Teams that take care of each other foster personal and collective resilience.

Also essential is an openness to discussing mental stress. The most recent public examples come from Olympians Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka. In my view, each demonstrated courage in coming forward and opening up. Knowing one’s limits and openly acknowledging

them is a strength, not a weakness. Only then can one get support, or the team make changes beneficial to all.

One exercise I like to do is to ask leaders and their teams to craft a resilience narrative that makes an otherwise abstract concept tangible. For example, one may start with describing what resilience means for your emergency operations centre (EOC). Then dig deeper and repeat the exercise for each section within the EOC. And then each sub-section. You will likely define human, IT, financial and other requirements to achieve resilience. You can then explore what must be in place for you to meet each requirement. The result is greater clarity as well as a credible pathway forward. The process also builds relationships and sets the stage for trust.

None of this works without trust. It is easy for a government agency, civic sector organisation and even private sector companies to assume that they are trusted by the internal and external stakeholders.

After all, there is a noble mission, a values statement on the website and the organisation is populated by good people. What else is needed? It turns out that there is much more to it.

One revealing exercise is to step back and look at how many signals of mistrust are built into an organisation’s processes, protocols and even into its physical appearance. How many approvals are required to make relatively routine purchases? How many pages are there in your travel expense guidelines? How many forms do you require from disaster survivors before they can be considered for relief? Are there physical barriers separating your people from those they are meant to serve? In short, how many implicit and explicit indicators demonstrate that you mistrust others and that, perhaps, they should not trust you?

An alternative approach is to design from trust – an idea originated by trust visionary Jerry Michalsk – and assume that most people have good intentions and build the system accordingly. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Liberty Bank & Trust, one of the few African American owned financial institutions in the region, eased rather than tightening restrictions, making loans to long term customers without collateral or proof of employment. Then president Alden McDonald, Jr quoted his grandfather for National Public Radio: “He said 97 per cent of the people in the world are honest. He said: ‘So make the rules for 97 per cent, not the three per cent of dishonesty.’” Open-source and microfinance are other examples of efforts that start with trust. How different would your operation be if you did the same?

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How might it enhance your perceived trustworthiness?

When I facilitate ART exercises in classes or at strategic offsites, they stimulate creativity and imagination. They offer an opportunity to unearth otherwise unheard voices about both obstacles and opportunities. Try them as you reset, refocus, and re-engage your organisation for the challenges of 2022.

Another approach to navigating this complexity and change is offered by April Rinne in her new book, *Flux: 8 Superpowers for Thriving in Constant Change*. I spoke with Rinne and she told me that she chose the word flux quite

carefully because ‘flux’ is both a noun and a verb. As a noun, it means constant change. As a verb, it means to make fluid. Both are highly relevant to today’s crisis leaders. The world described above is in flux. To adapt continually to shifting conditions and emerging threats, leader thinking, as well as the organisations and operations they lead, must flux.

In ‘fluxy’ conditions, a leader must rapidly discern where rigidity is a strength and where it is a weakness, obstructing progress. In the response to super storm Sandy, I deployed to New York City alongside the FEMA Innovation Team. FEMA Deputy Administrator Rich Serino sent the team into the field with simple instructions: Solve problems and don’t break the law. In doing so, he struck the right balance. He had to be firm regarding legal boundaries while also empowering the team to adapt as necessary to meet the needs of the affected population.

My time with the team was indeed fluid in discovering problems, trying innovative solutions, forging new alliances and building bridges between formal and informal response networks. Although this team was rapidly organised – including FEMA personnel and volunteers – and faced a violently disrupted environment, it approached uncertainty, in Rinne’s terms: “From a place of hope rather than fear.” This helped team members to self-organise into a highly collaborative, co-operative and co-ordinated group, working productively in largely autonomous sub-teams.

Leading in turbulent times is as challenging as it is rewarding. Knowing what to do is important, but knowing how to think becomes ever more crucial as complex, novel incidents increase in scale and frequency.

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