

# What The Leader Needs To Know: Ensuring Leadership In Response To Crisis

Leo F. Flanagan, Jr., Ph.D.

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## The Opportunity

In response to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks business leaders, employees and enterprises maintained and re-established operations through extraordinary efforts. Clearly, individual and team efforts produced results beyond any reasonable expectation.

Against this backdrop, it is tempting to believe that you and your leadership team will be able to effectively respond to any future crisis. This belief, while understandable, may create unintended risks to your business and, as importantly, not take advantage of opportunities to increase competitiveness.

Consider some of the things we know about how people, including leaders, respond to traumatic events:

- Most people will recover from the impact of a traumatic event (e.g. terrorist attack, industrial accident, hurricane, fire) within six months. Usually performance will decline during those first six months.
- People directly impacted by an event may take longer and experience greater difficulty in recovering.<sup>1</sup>
- People experiencing acute stress reactions include expatriates across the world not directly experiencing the event.<sup>2</sup>
- A significant percentage of those impacted by an event will develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- The vast majority of people impacted by a traumatic event will experience symptoms of distress that impair decision-making and performance.
- Core responses include disassociating and distancing oneself from the reality of the event. Those leaders most essential to an effective response may naturally and to some degree unknowingly respond in this way.
- Previous experience coping with an event will enable some to respond better to future events – for others a previous experience will decrease their effectiveness in response to future events<sup>3</sup>.
- Key behaviors that enable individuals to minimize the impact of an event on their performance also significantly improve their leadership, decision-making and performance under normal business conditions.

If you invest in developing key behaviors in your leaders you will both minimize the impact of an event on them and your business and increase their performance as business leaders on a continuing basis. In short, investing in the right set of leadership behaviors will produce a long-term return while minimizing the impact of any event. Unlike other necessary investments in contingency planning this investment will produce a measurable return even if a crisis event does not occur.

## How To Leverage It

### 1. Know The Behaviors That Build The Resilience Of Leaders

There is extensive research documenting those behaviors and other factors that increase the resilience and effectiveness of leaders. Research has documented what helps leaders perform in response to business challenges<sup>4</sup> as well as traumatic natural, terrorist or industrial events<sup>5</sup>.

Among these are: 1. Maintaining a sense of personal commitment to multiple goals; 2. Active engagement in responding to challenges; 3. Seeing change as an opportunity for improvement; 4. Consistently using coping strategies; 5. Setting limits; 6. Using personal networks for support; 7. Identifying opportunities in the face of challenge or crisis; 8. Flexible and creative problem-solving; 9. Information seeking; and 10. Efficient use of personal and organizational resources.

### 2. Match These Behaviors Against Those In Your Leadership Competence Model

In most cases, we've found that a significant number if not most of the behaviors that build resilience are already included in our client's existing leadership competence model.

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With all the demands for time and attention, it's imperative that you don't add yet another “list” of things to what is already expected of leaders. The language used in the resilience research and that used in your competence model may differ – but the behaviors may be identical or very similar. Someone with expertise in both can quickly identify the degree of overlap.

Where one or more resilience behaviors are not part of your competence model, integrate them into the existing model – don't build a new one. Focus on integrating specific behaviors into existing competencies – not building new ones.

Once you've integrated the resilience behaviors into your existing leadership competence model highlight them. Ensure their particular role and importance is communicated at every opportunity.

### 3. Learn & Practice Resilience Behaviors In Short Modules

Not only does building leadership resilience require all day training or offsites, it's far better to avoid them. Integrate building leadership resilience into your existing leadership meetings.

Keep each module short (ideally 45 minutes but no more than 90) and highly focused. Here's a sample outline of the sequencing and length of your modules:

- Leadership Resilience Overview
  - Definition & Key Behaviors
  - Implications for Business Results
  - Responding to Crises
  - Our Plan To Build Resilience
  - Length: 60 minutes
- Key Resilience Behavior 1
  - Overview
  - Self-Assessment
  - Practice
  - Length: 45 minutes
- Key Resilience Behaviors 2 – 10
  - Same format & length as for Key Resilience Behavior 1

### 4. Integrate Your Leadership Competence Model Into Contingency Planning

Even leaders who were personally involved in the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks or other major crises may take a blasé attitude toward contingency planning. Remember one of the core responses to traumatic events is to distance oneself from them. You can counteract this by making sure to highlight the fact that the key behaviors provide successful leadership in a crisis also ensure success during the normal course of business.

While the same skills are required in both crisis and non-crisis situations, in the former a much higher level of competence and performance is required. "Good enough" is not sufficient anymore. Your leaders must be extremely competent and confident in performing these key behaviors. This will ensure overcoming a crisis with the added benefit of heightening normal business performance. Again, and importantly, leaders who excel in these behaviors will drive superior business performance.

### 5. Assess Performance

Incorporate a clear focus on these core behaviors in your established talent reviews, succession planning, performance appraisals, and development plans.

When you engage in table top contingency exercises, make sure a key part of the debriefing is providing each leader with feedback on how they performed these key behaviors.

### 6. Encourage Social Support

A key predictor of resilience is the availability of social support. Social support can encourage leaders to engage or disengage during a crisis or challenge. In order for significant others to encourage engagement they must:

- Feel confident the leader is as safe as possible;
- Know how to support the leader;
- Understand the leader's contribution; and
- Believe the leader is part of and supported by a strong team at work.

Provide your leaders with the information to address each of these issues in communicating with their significant others. Communicating directly with significant others is a sensitive issue. It is best to let individual leaders initiate communication with partners, spouses, family and friends. Following this it may be helpful to provide significant others to a portion of your company's intranet where they can find appropriate, non-proprietary details of your contingency plans and available support services.

<sup>1</sup> See for example: *Fostering Resilience in Response To Terrorism: A Fact Sheet for Psychologists Working With Adults*, APA Task Force On Resilience in Response To Terrorism, American Psychological Association. Retrieved from [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org). Retrieved June 2004

<sup>2</sup> Speckhard, Anne. "Acute Stress Disorder in Diplomats, Military, and Civilian Americans Living Abroad Following the September 11<sup>th</sup> Terrorist Attacks on America." *Professional Psychology: Research & Practice* 2003, Vol. 34, No. 2, 151-158

<sup>3</sup> Dougall, A.L., et al. "Similarity of Prior Trauma Exposure as a Determinant of Chronic Stress Responding to an Airline Disaster." *Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology*, 2000, Vol. 68, No. 2, 290-295.

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Maddi, S.R., Kahn, S., Maddi, K.L. "The Effectiveness of Hardiness Training." *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice & Research*. 50(2), Spr 1998, 78-86.

<sup>5</sup> Fredrickson, B.L., et al. "What Good Are Positive Emotions in Crises? A Prospective Study of Resilience and Emotions Following the Terrorist Attacks on the United States on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001." *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 2003, Vol. 84, No. 2, 365-376

#### About The Author

**Leo F. Flanagan, Jr., Ph.D.** is President of Flanagan Consultants, LLC. He has more than 25 years experience in increasingly challenging and successful assignments across the globe. He has a Ph.D. in psychology and has assisted communities, organizations and individuals in responding to a wide range of natural and human made crises including violence, tornadoes and the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on New York City. Flanagan Consultants, LLC helps leading companies formulate and execute their business, marketing, human resources and crisis response strategies. Clients include leaders in financial services, consumer products, hospitality, pharmaceuticals, government, and retailing. Leo can be reached directly at 203-321-8423 or [Leo@FlanaganConsultants.com](mailto:Leo@FlanaganConsultants.com).