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How a Leader Keeps Calm in Crisis

Community



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"Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you."

Ruth Bader Ginsburg

This quote, by Ruth Bader Ginsburg, is my guiding principle whenever I am faced with crises or challenges. Individual action and integrity are crucial, but for good leaders, it is also imperative to inspire others.

Good leaders keep the people around them — whether their employees, family members, or communities — centered in the storm, giving them the focus and support they need to take care of themselves and protect their mental health.

Of course, staying calm and composed under pressure is not always as easy as it seems — especially in times of crisis. Whether it's your two-year-old having a tantrum at the store (not that mine ever did) or leading an IPO with a very short window for success, it's important to showcase composure in times of stress and uncertainty.



It is imperative to maintain composure throughout chaos in the workplace and at home. GoodStudio / Shutterstock.com

As a deputy general counsel at Flex (NASDAQ: FLEX), a US\$26 billion diversified manufacturing company, and a mother, I know all too well that coping with stressful situations at home and in the office can be a challenging art to master. Life balance is something I am always working on, but here are the top five lessons I've learned over my 20 plus year career to stay composed under pressure:

Pause before punching

As leaders, those who stay calm and positive set a valuable example for their teams.

Every crisis is different. Before reacting, take a step back, think through the outcome and how serious it is, and ask yourself what you really need to do. It's essential not to come from an irrational, emotional place. Being in crisis mode challenges our rational thinking, and we sometimes resort to a knee-jerk reaction.

As leaders, those who stay calm and positive set a valuable example for their teams. Do not let emotions become a distraction. Don't yell or become overly animated when stressful moments appear. Instead, take a break, sleep on the response, or take some deep breaths.



Strong leaders tend to take a step back and rationalize their thinking before making unreasonable decisions amidst a crisis. TeraVector / Shutterstock.com

Strong leaders must master maintaining their composure and taking a beat while remaining courageous and accountable.

In an era where speed matters, slowing down (even just for a second) can pay dividends. In fact, [research](#) suggests, “postponing the onset of the decision process by as little as 50 to 100 milliseconds enables the brain to focus on attention of the most relevant information and block out irrelevant distractors.” Strong leaders must master maintaining their composure and taking a beat while remaining courageous and accountable.

Keep a positive mental attitude

Everybody faces stressful situations at some time in their lives. Through those experiences, level-set yourself, and grade the crisis you’re in — ask yourself, what are the consequences of my fears coming to fruition?

Working as a lawyer for over two decades, I’ve been through ups and downs, especially over the last three years dealing with the global pandemic. I’ve learned that resiliency in times of crisis is vital. A good reminder is to ask: Is this the end of the earth? What can I do to make this better? Be your own coach and tell yourself that you’ve gone through worse.

Research backs this idea up. In his book [*The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance at Work*](#), Shawn Anchor explores the power of keeping a positive mental attitude. He writes, “doctors put in a positive mood before making a diagnosis show almost three times more intelligence and creativity than doctors in a neutral state, and they make accurate diagnoses 19 percent faster. Optimistic salespeople outsell their pessimistic

counterparts by 56 percent. Students primed to feel happy before taking math achievement tests far outperform their neutral peers.”



Remember, with a positive mindset, not only can you preserve the storm, but thrive and succeed.

Miller Inna / *Shutterstock.com*

Ask for help

Talking to someone about your worries or advice is a safe way to relieve tension and anxiety you might be experiencing in a crisis or stressful situation. A large part of getting through a crisis in the workplace is building relationships with coworkers who will see you as a trusted partner.

Everyone has missteps at times, but when you have built up trust and accountability with your colleagues, they will know you're trying your best, and be more willing to work together to problem solve. However, you should start fostering relationships with your coworkers and employees when you're not in crisis, because when there is one, you will need those relationships in place.

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Then, there are also relationships with family and friends — the human connections that make our lives meaningful and fulfilling. We must remember to prioritize these relationships because, at the end of the day, everything we do is for them.

Make time for self-care

Sometimes, prioritizing self-care can seem like a chore instead of a treat. In my own life, it took me breaking my back in an awful car accident on the way to work to help me realize self-care should be an everyday priority, especially when dealing with stressful situations in the workplace.

The [National Institute of Mental Health](#) shares that, “self-care can help you manage stress, lower your risk of illness, and increase your energy. Even small acts of self-care in your daily life can have a big impact.”



Prioritizing self-care daily helps to protect your mental health during stressful times. *BRO.vector / Shutterstock.com*

It's crucial to consistently practice this in different ways, making self-care a part of your daily schedule. Even after just five minutes of meditation, you'll notice a difference in how you're feeling, especially in evolving and escalating situations. The governing body on mental health also suggests other activities like exercise, hydration, prioritizing sleep, practicing gratitude, and more.

The bottom line? Be present when you're present — knowing when to make tradeoffs and where to prioritize your energy.

Think ahead

If a crisis can be averted, it's better to confront the problem early rather than wait and see if it clears up. A true leader asks questions and discusses the problem or troublesome behavior when it's developing into a pattern, instead of sweeping things under the rug. Thinking ahead can help you

avoid crisis down the road.

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Stressful situations are inevitable, but it's important to remember that the ability to maintain composure in times of crisis is an essential part of a leader's skill set. Times of crisis are a true test — for the entire team and leadership workforce.

As noted in [Catalyst's Adaptability Report](#), "If you are a leader, the skill of adaptability is especially important because as you rise through the ranks, the problems you are solving become less straightforward (i.e., the goal may be clear, but the way to reach that goal is not). You need to have a positive attitude toward change and a healthy tolerance for ambiguity, especially when trying to forecast what the business landscape will look like in the next six, 12, or 24 months amid myriad and unpredictable forces."

By successfully navigating stormy waters and keeping people focused, inspired, and calm, you will emerge with a stronger, more resilient team. Remember, calm breeds calm.

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Heather Childress is a senior vice president, deputy general counsel at Flex. She is a seasoned, business-oriented legal executive, with over 20 years of industry experience. Childress was named a “Woman of Influence” in 2021 by the Silicon Valley Business Journal. She is devoted to making a positive impact on the community through action, and is passionate about workplace culture, equality, next generation development initiatives, and change management.

