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Public Leadership in Times of Crisis: Mission Impossible?

Crisis management (prevention, preparedness, response, and reconstruction) is a tough task for political and bureaucratic leaders. This article documents the persistent tensions between the expectations and realities of crisis leadership. It explores the popular notion that crises provide key opportunities for reform. The very occurrence of a crisis is then thought to expose the status quo as problematic, making it easier to gain momentum for alternative policies and institutions. We argue that the opportunities for reform in the wake of crisis are smaller than often thought. The prime reason is that the requisites of crisis leadership are at odds with the requirements of effective reform.

Crisis: A Window for Leadership?

In the days following September 11, 2001, President Bush saw his domestic approval ratings and international standing soar to unprecedented levels. Similarly, New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani's *Zivilkourage* during the first days of the World Trade Center tragedy propelled him back into the folk-hero status he once had enjoyed when taking the mayoral office on the wings of his crime-fighting reputation; gone was his image as a weary politician wounded by scandal. Their personal reputations boosted, both leaders were able to muster strong political and societal support for the drastic measures and budget claims they proposed in response to the crisis.

President Bush's favorable position in the initial phase of the national crisis mirrors that of former president Jimmy Carter. In 1979, Carter enjoyed a wave of leader-focused patriotism when U.S. embassy personnel were kidnapped in Tehran; the wave crested and broke with Carter's inability to bring his people home. Eleven months into the unresolved hostage crisis, Carter was badly defeated by Ronald Reagan in the presidential elections.

The New York mayor can look across the Atlantic for a similar anecdote. In 1992, an El-Al Boeing 747 crashed into the suburbs of Amsterdam. Mayor Van Thijn directed the city's popular "caring government" response—victims were assured long-term support. The response came to haunt the

city administration years later when victims had lost this promised government support. An ensuing parliamentary investigation in 1999 tarnished the government's reputation and even threatened the survival of the national coalition.

Crisis and leadership are closely intertwined phenomena. People experience crises as episodes of threat and uncertainty, a grave predicament requiring urgent action (Rosenthal, Boin, and Comfort 2001). It is a natural inclination in such distress to look to leaders to "do something." When crisis leadership results in reduced stress and a return to normality, people herald their "true leaders." Successful performance in times of collective stress turns leaders into statesmen. But when the crisis fails to dissipate and "normality" does not return, leaders are obvious scapegoats.

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The challenge to “bring things back to normal” is compounded by the sense of opportunity that often accompanies a crisis. It is a widely held notion that crisis generates a window of opportunity for reforming institutional structures and long-standing policies (Kingdon 1984; Keeler 1993). This “crisis-reform thesis” suggests that, in order to be effective reformers, leaders should avoid being tainted by crises and simultaneously exploit their dynamic potential.¹

We argue that the requirements of crisis management are inherently incompatible with the requisites for effective reform.² Our argument unfolds in three stages. First, we set out the changing nature of the crises that beset today’s governments. Second, we show the difficulty of managing these crises in the face of popular expectations. Third, we assert that effective crisis management is at odds with effective reform strategies.

The Transformation of Crises and Crisis Consciousness: Leadership Challenges

Crisis management has never been easy. Organizational chaos, media pressure, stress, and inaccurate information are but a few factors that make it very hard for crisis leaders to make sound decisions. Changes in the nature and context of contemporary crises render these decisions nearly elusive. Certainly, the classic contingencies—natural disasters, industrial accidents, violent political conflict, and public disorder—continue to menace us. But when they transpire on our modern world stage, their sociopolitical impact affects more players than ever before.

The modern crisis is increasingly complex. It is not spatially confined by common boundaries; it entangles quickly with other deep problems, and its impact is prolonged (Rosenthal 1998; ‘t Hart and Boin 2001). The modern crisis is the product of several modernization processes—globalization, deregulation, information and communication technology, developments and technological advances, to name but a few. These advances promote a close-knit world that is nonetheless susceptible to infestation by a single crisis. Comparatively slight mishaps within these massive and intricate infrastructures can rapidly escalate in unforeseen ways (Perrow 1999).

A prime example can be found in the European food and agriculture sector. One animal was diagnosed with foot-and-mouth disease in a remote English farm and, within days, the disease had affected all of Europe. Farmers, slaughterhouses, distributors, butcheries, consumers, inspection agencies, policy makers, and politicians endured enormous economic and social-psychological costs. A week later, the world had installed precautionary measures to resist the disease. Canada, Japan, Mexico, Australia—all were on alert, and not without reason. Open international borders permit both economic growth and epidemic

proliferation, and so, too, invite massive flows of illegal migration. Epidemiologists warn of resistant killer viruses whose destructive impact is magnified by the enhanced global mobility of people, goods, and animals (Garret 1994). Modern crises are no longer confined to their site of origin.

Equally important is the cognitive and sociocultural context of contemporary crises. After decades of complacency, there is a growing sense of vulnerability. Unease prevails, even though memories of world war have faded, communism has died, political terrorism has decreased, and the modern state has proven a reliable and effective custodian. Highly prosperous countries in Western Europe have experienced more rather than fewer disasters and disturbances in the last decade. As this is being written, America and the West are still reeling from the September 11 attacks and the consuming war on terrorism they unleashed. Scientists issue warnings of many other global threats—medical, ecological, technological, and biological. The net result of these combined assaults on the public’s peace of mind has been a renewed concern with risk and vulnerability (Beck 1992).

Many citizens are wary of crises; at the same time, they are naive about the intricacies of crises. Citizens expect to be safeguarded by their state; the idea that wholesale crisis cannot be prevented comes as a shock. That crises are not exclusively the fault of exogenous forces does little to reconcile public frustration. Postmortem investigations often unveil erroneous policies or bureaucratic mismanagement. This erosion of public trust in the capability of state institutions to perform their classic custodian functions is accompanied by increasingly assertive and tenacious media coverage of risks, disasters, and other critical events. The aftermath of today’s crises tends to be as intense and contentious as the acute crisis periods are, with leaders put under pressure by streams of informal investigations, proactive journalism, insurance claims, and juridical (including criminal) proceedings against them. Leadership in the face of this sort of adversity is, in short, precarious.

Leadership Issues

Given the nature of modern crises and their ensuing disruption, it is best to reassess our understanding of leadership in modern crises. First and foremost, we should abandon the notion that crises are events that are neatly delineated in time and space (Rosenthal 1998). Instead, we need to treat crises as extended periods of high threat, high uncertainty, and high politics that disrupt a wide range of social, political, and organizational processes. Crises are dynamic and chaotic processes, not discrete events sequenced neatly on a linear time scale. A crisis may smolder, flare up, wind down, flare up again, depending as much on the pattern of physical events as on the framing and

interpretation of these events by the mass media, politics, and the general public. The scope of the crisis may expand and contract depending on which themes and issues command attention at different points in time, as the crisis impinges upon and is produced by the broader developmental context of the society in which it occurs (Porfiriev 1996). Political and bureaucratic leaders have a hard time coming to terms with the open-ended duration of contemporary crises, particularly when they seek crisis closure where none is possible ('t Hart and Boin 2001).

The increased scope, complexity, and political salience of crises raises the stakes for policy makers. The physical and psychological impact of crises is increasingly construed as a product of past prevention and preparedness policies, as well strategic political choices made during the crisis that play up or down the importance, unacceptability, and urgency of the events. Not only must policy makers establish beyond a doubt that they *cannot* be held responsible for the occurrence of any particular crisis, it is assumed they are well prepared for any crisis that may occur and will take effective measures to protect the public, limit harm, and compensate damages. Any event or behavior that deviates from these standards increases public unease and is likely to elicit strong criticism.

For a long time, it was left to mid-level planners and operational agencies to design and implement prevention and preparedness policies. Work in these areas typically occurred in bureaucratic backwaters, far removed from the hurry and strife of high politics. The newly emerging context of risk and crisis management is radically different. A fitting perspective on new forms of crisis management emphasizes the political-psychological challenges of coping with unexpected contingencies. It assumes massive media interest, and therefore considerable political arousal. It accepts that critical events are inherently ambiguous. The very naming and framing of certain social conditions or clusters of events—say, creeping soil and water pollution, mysterious illnesses among battle veterans, rising crime, or an increase in attacks on foreigners—as “crises” then becomes a major political act (Edelman 1977; Reich 1991; 't Hart 1993). Whether they like it or not, crisis management has become a leadership issue.

Crisis Leadership in the Risk Society: A Mission Impossible?

The German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) observed that we live in a “risk society,” in which concerns about personal safety and health as well as collective security have risen to the top of the social and political agenda. The risk society is characterized by a substantial gap between citizen expectations and leadership efforts in preventing and containing crises. It nurtures a culture of concern in

which political and bureaucratic leaders do not seem to measure up to the increasingly urgent demand for effective crisis prevention, preparedness, and response. This social-psychological and political climate makes it very hard—perhaps even impossible—for leaders to emerge from crises unscathed. There are six public expectations that leaders are often incapable of meeting:

1. Popular expectation: Leaders should put public safety first.

Research finding: Leaders consider the economic and political costs of regulating and enforcing maximum safety too expensive. They settle for, and pay for, sub-optimal levels of safety.

In general, there are two conspicuous reasons why public policy leaders settle for suboptimal safety efforts. The most important one is that top-level policy makers have other legitimate concerns than safety (Sagan 1994; Heimann 1997). Enhancing prosperity by stimulating economic activity is a key goal of leaders, who are acutely aware of the regulatory dilemmas they face: Prioritized safety and environmental concerns in a region make firms and investors disinclined to bring their business to that region. The burdens of compliance are too bothersome, and investors will take their interests elsewhere. To amplify the dilemma, there appears to be a positive correlation between economic growth and safety (Wildavsky 1988)—the problem is that growth leads to safety, and not vice versa. Simply, a dollar is better spent on the economy than on prevention. Preventative policies suppress growth. Leaders need to somehow reconcile these realities.³

A second deterrent to prioritizing safety measures is political rather than economical. Politically, crisis prevention and preparedness are delicate and relatively thankless tasks. Because successful crisis prevention and mitigation are nonevents, they draw little media attention and generate no political credit. Ironically, the modern public supports this course, routinely advocating such policies as deregulation and citizen responsibility. Common neoliberal complaints are directed at big government, overregulation, and bureaucratic red tape. Still and all, avoiding crisis prevention is a liability. When a crisis occurs, politicians and the press engage in retrospective fault finding. Earlier calls for hands-off government policies are drowned out by calls for strong public leadership. Leaders sit precariously, then, between a rock and hard place. If they implement crisis prevention, they are chastised for doing too much too soon. If they ignore crisis prevention, they are scolded for having done too little, too late.

2. Popular expectation: Leaders should prepare for worst-case scenarios.

Research finding: Most government and business leaders are reluctant to prepare themselves for their crisis-response roles.

Ideally, leaders enter office with a strong conviction that crisis avoidance and preparedness are inherently important—or at least, they are actively persuaded by their advisers that ignoring crisis issues is done at grave peril. Evidence suggests, however, that neither are regular conditions (Lagadec 1997; Carrel 2000). For example, all but one of the American presidents (ironically, Jimmy Carter) serving during the nuclear age took lightly their role as the ultimate decision maker on war and peace. This is suggested by their lack of active interest and regular attendance at Pentagon exercises (Ford 1985). Reports on crisis planning at other levels of government and in other countries show a similar picture. In general, crisis planning is taken seriously only by leaders with prior crisis experience or within communities that have an emergency subculture born of previous disasters.

The corporate world is no exception. Top business managers are generally averse to take crisis contingency planning seriously (Pauchant and Mitroff 1992). They always seem to have something better to do at the time. The drive for efficiency usually wins out over long-term efforts to improve reliability (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 1999). This lack of crisis preparedness cannot be portrayed solely as the product of harsh trade-offs in the allocation of leadership attention, however. There is a psychological resistance of leaders to face their personal, organizational, and societal vulnerabilities. Leaders at the pinnacle of business and politics alike are socialized into seeking opportunities to outpace their competitors rather than exercising strategic contingency management.

3. Popular expectation: Leaders should heed warnings about future crises.

Research finding: Most man-made disasters and violent conflicts are preceded by incubation periods during which policy makers misinterpret, are ignorant of, or flat-out ignore repeated indications of impending danger.

The failure to prevent foreseeable crises is well-documented in the literature on intelligence fiascoes and man-made disasters (Kam 1988; Turner and Pidgeon 1997). The problems that prevent leaders from heeding warnings are manifold and fundamental. Leaders are routinely engulfed in oceans of information and advice. Moreover, they face ambiguous and contradictory signals. Warnings do not come with flashing lights; they are hidden in expert reports, advisory memos, or a colleague's casual remark. The warnings have to be distilled from a series of seemingly minor and insignificant indications.

An additional problem is that information passageways to leaders often are obscured. Bad news, in particular, faces formidable obstacles on its way to the top of the organization, especially in bureaucratic organizations (Wilensky 1967). These barriers are fundamentally social. Nobody

wants to alarm his boss unnecessarily, and nobody wants to acquire the reputation of a troublemaker (Jackall 1988). In the absence of these signals, leaders run a big risk of becoming the victim of “silences” in the organizational communication pattern. This contradicts the myth that modern administration governs by foresight. Government discovers problems mainly by retrospection and negative feedback (Deutsch 1966; Van Gunsteren 1976). In fact, there is every indication that it takes a disaster for leaders to prepare for others. Nonprevention will continue to constitute the nature of organizations until structural and cultural alterations are actualized. These changes should focus on redirecting a culture of problem avoidance toward “high reliability” (Rochlin 1996; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 1999).

4. Popular expectation: During a crisis, leaders take charge and provide clear direction to crisis-management operations.

Research finding: Crisis operations are multiorganizational, transjurisdictional, polycentric response networks. They demand lateral coordination, not top-down command and control.

It is a common belief that the decision-making process guiding crisis-response efforts must and will be centralized (‘t Hart, Rosenthal, and Kouzmin 1993). This so-called centralization thesis underpins the public want of a figurehead who is “in charge” during times of crisis. In reality, crisis-response efforts depend on many people in several networks. At the political-strategic level, efforts to radically centralize decision-making authority tend to cause more friction than they resolve because they disturb well-established authority patterns (Benini 1999). In most democracies, governance takes place in shared power settings: Political leaders and institutions share power among each other, central government shares power with supranational and subnational governments, and the state shares power with societal groups and private corporations. Unless there is an overwhelming need for drastic measures (during war, for instance), actors in the crisis-response network whose policy-making roles are abruptly diminished by the ad hoc centralization of authority will, to say the least, not be motivated to contribute their resources and comply with centrally issued policy directives.

So even if, in most large-scale crisis situations, the myth of centralized response structures is sustained by setting up and formally empowering crisis centers, pivotal policy decisions actually emerge from a multi-actor coordination process, in which consultation, negotiation, and outright confrontation are the orders of the day (‘t Hart, Rosenthal, and Kouzmin 1993). Moreover, at the operational-response level, centralization is near impossible, because many dynamic, situation-specific, and urgent problems arise simultaneously at different places and nodes in the response

network. These can only be handled adequately by operational leaders with sufficient mandate to take the actions they deem necessary (Flin 1996).

5. Popular expectation: Leaders should be compassionate toward victims of crises. This empathy should play out in both word and deed.

Research finding: Leaders want to provide victims with care, but they often fall prey to their own unrealistic promises.

In the event of a crisis, citizens in the risk society anticipate high-standard government care. The public demands that government meet their short-term physical and financial needs. They also expect assistance in the years following a crisis; they want help with material disruptions, health problems, and psychosocial trauma. Victims of disaster are both organized and vocal in assuring these needs are met (Reich 1991; Kletz 1994). Only leaders who choose to gamble popularity will attempt to ignore or silence victims' groups. But tempering victims' emotional and prima facie eminently reasonable claims is difficult even for the gambler. In the heat of massive tragedy, leaders may be tempted to assure victims of continued government support.

To illustrate, we look again at the 1992 El-Al Boeing 747 crash in Amsterdam. The Israeli cargo plane devastated, in particular, two apartment buildings. Mayor Van Thijn's "caring government" response promised the inhabitants long-term care. A component of his response was directed at lobbying central government to provide resident status to affected illegal immigrants (Rosenthal et al. 1994). Alas, nonvictim illegal migrants endeavored to exploit the upshot of Van Thijn's efforts, conniving to obtain resident permits. The mayor's reaction to this unanticipated entanglement was highly unpopular. He had to respond with screening procedures, which evoked a cold, rational-bureaucratic image—a far cry from the sympathetic face he had painstakingly projected. Also, the local and national health authorities reacted dismissively when a number of inhabitants of the disaster area developed various types of respiratory and other complaints, giving rise to wild speculation about the nature of the undisclosed content of the Israeli cargo plane. Six years later, these complaints escalated to a row of formidable proportions, ending in a highly contentious parliamentary investigation procedure and threatening the ruling coalition (Boin, Van Duin, and Heyse 2001).

During the course of a crisis, leaders may be forced to qualify or retract promises made and face severe criticism for doing so—criticism that may last for many years after the disaster. This is to be expected in the risk society. More and more citizens take their government to court, seeking retribution for unfulfilled promises. Juridification of the crisis aftermath is becoming more common across many

nations. This alone, and unpopularity a certainty, should warn leaders that compassionate crisis response is best forerun by logic. At the very least, leaders should install response measures that avoid issuing blank checks, rewarding free riders, and setting costly precedents.

6. Popular expectation: Leaders strive to learn lessons after a crisis.

Research finding: Leaders get caught in the politics of blaming that dominates the aftermath of modern contemporary crises. Learning is encumbered in this atmosphere.

Because of their dramatic and disruptive nature, crises naturally induce a series of questions about their causes and implications. Questioning leadership response to crises is just as natural—the answers to these questions determines what kinds of lessons are drawn to prevent reoccurrence.

Crises would seem to provide definite learning opportunities; clearer forms of negative feedback can hardly be imagined (Deutsch 1966; Stern 1996). Yet impartial diagnosis of what happened is not easy when the passions are aroused. This has always been the case, but in contemporary society where fate is no longer accepted as an explanation for emergencies, disasters invariably are portrayed and experienced as policy failures (Bovens and 't Hart 1996). In this environment, post-crisis investigations are less about learning than they are about blaming. Journalists and citizens alike seem to think someone must be held accountable for the shortcomings that permitted the crisis. Policy makers know this, and they have responded by perfecting their defensive routines such as acquiring plausible deniability, improving their public communications skills, and spin-doctoring (Edelman 2001). The more time spent polishing these mechanisms, the less time leaders spend focusing on the learning potential afforded by crises. Genuine efforts toward system improvements are lost in postcrisis politics. And engaging in critical self-reflection amounts to political hara-kiri for today's policy makers.

If post-crisis learning occurs at all, it is generally in the long run. It is a laborious process conducted away from the media spotlight and the turbulence of political and juridical proceedings against top officials. Learning is often a matter of designing unheroic technological improvements and adapting bureaucratic routines. This requires patience, institutional memory, and a low-conflict atmosphere—attributes that political leaders cannot easily provide.

Crisis Leadership Revisited: From Containment to Reform

The very characteristics of crises that make them hard to control also give them dynamic potential. In their enormity, ambiguity, and sensitivity, crises threaten the status

quo and delegitimize the policies and institutions underpinning the status quo. Leaders may choose to defend these institutions and policies, operating in self-defensive measures and blame shifting. Or, they may exploit the chaotic mood during crises to change them. Studies of policy reform and organizational change have shown it is common to think of crises as opportunities for desired change (Polsby 1984; Hall 1993; Keeler 1993; Cortell and Peterson 1999). This “crisis-reform thesis” (Boin and ‘t Hart 2000) is predicated on the observation that reform of any kind is difficult to accomplish. Current policies and institutional arrangements are embedded in laws, protected by dominant coalitions, and sustained by habituation and organizational inertia (Hogwood and Peters 1983). Although it may be possible to smuggle in reform through a series of cumulative, incremental policy adjustments (Lindblom 1979; Rose and Davies 1994), this is a time-consuming, easily reversible, and potentially drifting process (Goodin 1982).

Some policy scholars argue that governance unfolds over time as a pattern of “punctuated equilibria”—long eras of stability alternated by short-lived periods of uncertainty and conflict (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). They point to critical junctures during which existing policy settings, policy goals, and institutional arrangements for policy making are under pressure. This pressure may jeopardize their self-evident legitimacy and de-institutionalize governance (Suchman 1995). These notions support the crisis-reform thesis—indeed, the reform potential of crises can be fully exploited by leaders acting on these critical junctures. Recent events in the European agriculture sector underscore this notion. British, Danish, Dutch, and German ministers changed the philosophy and composition of their sectors after bovine spongiform encephalopathy (generally known as mad cow disease), pig fever, scrapies, foot-and-mouth disease, and other viral diseases infringed upon farmers and meat producers throughout Europe. The ministers of agriculture battled with their more conservative and domestically constrained colleagues in the European Council. The ministers drew in the heads of state, who had to take a stand on the issue. These discussions are continuing at both the national and European levels. In this case, crisis management became a matter of political and bureaucratic reform craft.

Overcoming the many barriers to institutional change in policy making is, however, a daunting task. Reform leadership entails a number of functional requirements. Reform leaders need to articulate that the status quo is untenable, propose a coherent set of radical and politically sanctioned reforms, and guard their integrity during reform implementation. Reform leadership requires the embracing of novel policy ideas, the skills to sell them to diverse audiences, and the wielding of power to see them enacted (Bryson and Crosby 1992; Moon 1995). Reform

leaders must exercise their gusto in an environment of inherent uncertainty and considerable resistance in societal, political, and bureaucratic arenas.

The popular notion that crises make it easy to overcome long-standing barriers to reform is not only naive, but also logically unfounded. Crises present reform-minded leaders with an intricate mix of opportunities and risks. Hence, a compounding tension for crisis leadership comes to the fore: The imperatives of effective crisis containment conflict with the imperatives of reform craft. It suggests, at the very least, that crisis management and reform leadership cannot be the province of the same executives.

1. Reform imperative: Exploit the crisis damage. To build support for nonincremental reform, portray crises as the result of flaws in the existing institutional order. Communicate a strong commitment to make major changes.

Crisis-management imperative: Minimize the damage, alleviate the pain, and restore order. This requires the reaffirmation of existing values and structures.

Reform leadership is an exercise in “creative destruction” (Schumpeter 1943). Old structures must be destroyed before new ones can be implemented. This explains why reform leaders frame critical contingencies and policy predicaments in terms of crises. This delegitimizes and thus de-institutionalizes existing values and policies. In the wake of a crisis, leaders may seize upon the damage done. Their strategy, then, is twofold: They dramatize the seriousness of the situation, yet at the same time externalize its causes. Leaders can use the language of crisis only if they are not at risk of being blamed for the crisis at hand (newly incumbent leaders are, all else being equal, in a much better position to do so than veteran leaders). The communication of personal commitment to reform is an essential second component of the strategy. If leaders do not effectively articulate this willpower, critics will soon see through their lip service to change. Of course, the devil is in the dosage. A fine line separates effective communication of resolve from an autistic determination to seek reform at all costs.

But in the thick of crisis, reform is not a priority for crisis leaders. They are under tremendous pressure to bring things back to normal first. Core values and proven methods become anchors in stormy seas; crisis is not a time for exploring new options that pay off in the long run only. The use of reform rhetoric at this time of turbulence may compound rather than alleviate the collective stress generated by crisis. It surely will evoke resistance among those who have a stake in the status quo *ex ante*. The political instincts of a successful leader tell him to preserve rather than destroy existing institutions and policies. Even new leaders who have emerged on a platform of change before a crisis occurs may find themselves forced to suspend their reform ambitions. Attractive though it may be in theory, seizing the opportu-

nity to play up crises for the sake of gaining momentum for reform amounts to taking such a huge gamble with history that many leaders may wish to avoid it.

2. Reform imperative: Successful reform leaders persuade their political environment that they have a plan. They present it as the only feasible policy option that will lead to a new and stable future.

Crisis-management imperative: Successful crisis leaders restore political confidence in the effectiveness of pre-existing policies and institutions.

Reform leadership is about persuasion. Commands and intimidation do not work in pluralistic polities. Reform leaders in particular have much persuading to do because their plans differ markedly from what exists. They have to convince multiple audiences that what they want is good, realistic, and inevitable. Moreover, they must convince stakeholders that the benefits of the proposed reform outweigh the sunk costs of existing structures and policies. This requires not only effective command and selection of facts but also the rhetorical skills to present them. It also touches on the socioemotional bond between leaders and citizens. Leaders need to do more than expose a crisis; they also need to reassure followers they know the right (if not the only) way out. Reformist crisis leaders, therefore, need to be constructive and destructive at the same time: build up their case for change, burn down the bridges to the past, and disqualify competing policy alternatives. To some extent, radical reforms need to be “oversold” to persuade constituencies that a sharp break with the past is in their interest—Helmut Kohl’s promise of the “blühende Landschaften” (green pastures) that would result from the crisis of German unification is a case in point.

A crisis may tempt reformers into the mistaken belief that the time is right. Political support is granted near-automatically in the early phases of a crisis. It usually begins to wane, however, as soon as the first shock has been absorbed and the first revelations of causes surface. When allegations about responsibility begin to dominate the political discourse, leaders will feel the political necessity to protect the past record of the policies and organizations they are held accountable for. Leaders who seek to gain momentum for reform by echoing assertions that the current crisis is not so much a tragedy, but a fiasco of existing policies and organizations, are taking a big risk. They may gain political support at large, but they do so at the price of antagonizing many of the stakeholders they have to deal with on a day-to-day basis long after the crisis is over.

3. Reform imperative: Successful reform leaders manage to secure early support of implementing actors for their plans.

Crisis-management imperative: Successful crisis leaders bypass routine policy-making procedures to speed up decision making.

Effective reform leaders anticipate implementation obstacles. They display an awareness of implementation structures, identify key players, and build sufficient support among them. They know that blueprints made in the ivory tower will not materialize. Organizational heterogeneity, powerful clienteles, and professional autonomy are a few of the factors that make consultation with implementing actors a prime condition for effective reform.

During a crisis, leaders tend to use a top-down, command-and-control style. Short-circuiting the decision-making process speeds up the government’s response capacity in the face of urgent threats. But the fiction of control continues once they are organized into small and coherent crisis centers and special committees. Gone are the endless negotiations with many stakeholders. Instead of brokering painstaking compromises, leaders actually make decisions and issue orders that other actors simply have to follow. In some cases, policy makers enjoy the top-down style so much that it takes considerable persuasion to get them to terminate the crisis regime and, sometimes literally, leave the bunker and get back to politics as usual (Rosenthal et al. 1994). Even well-meaning and considerate leaders who do not become addicted to top-down governance will be forced in a crisis to make crucial and controversial decisions without engaging in the normal procedures of consulting all involved. These centralization tendencies are most likely understood and temporarily accepted by many stakeholders. But if leaders are seen as abusing the centralized decision regime for a “crash through” strategy of pushing controversial reform, the backlash can be strong.

From Crisis-Induced Reforms to Reform-Induced Crises: Traps to Avoid

In their efforts to show effective leadership, crisis leaders may be tempted to exploit the window of opportunity and push through reform packages that would be unimaginable during normal times. The public policy literature suggests that crises enable them to temporarily stop muddling through and actually instigate some form of planned change.

While it may be true that the great leaders in history are those who turned crisis into prosperity, it should be remembered that many failed in the attempt. This should come as no surprise if one realizes the requirements of reformist leadership conflict with the best practices of conventional crisis management. In other words, the standard prescriptions for political reform craft are a dangerous guide for leaders in times of crisis.

What, then, can we tell leaders who are not content with restoring the status quo and seek to deliver long-awaited reform in the wake of crisis? In the absence of systematic research into cases of successful crisis-induced reform, we

cannot present a set of managerial prescriptions. But we have culled three lessons from our research that may help crisis leaders to avoid reform-induced crisis.

Lesson 1: Leaders need to formulate a crisis-management philosophy, which can help to negotiate the inherent dilemma of reparation and reform.

Effective crisis management is all about “dynamic conservatism” (Schon 1971). The conservative reflex is to defend core values and institutional commitments (Terry 1995). This can only be done if leaders flexibly adapt the policy-making structures and modus operandi of public organizations to the high-pressure context of crisis. It is not easy to determine what must change so that the rest can remain the same. Leaders, therefore, need some kind of policy compass or road map to help them negotiate the inherent tension between stewardship and reform craft. They must have a clear idea of what is worth preserving in their society, policy field, or organization. This can guide them once they are forced into the unfamiliar, chaotic terrain of a major crisis. Such a philosophy of crisis management should help to prevent common crisis response modes such as ad hocery, improvisation, and stress-induced rigidity (Holsti 1989; Rosenthal, Charles, and ‘t Hart 1989). It should prevent leaders from making immediate decisions with irreversible consequences; it focuses attention on the long-term consequences of any reform plans. The establishment of an Office for Homeland Security in the wake of September 11 underscores this point: The short-term reassurance effect may not measure up against the long-term coordination burdens the new department implies.

Lesson 2: Leaders should not push reform without considering opposite arguments. If they use the crisis to ignore critics, they will mobilize their own opposition at a time when their performance is already under scrutiny.

Leaders tend to overestimate their “crisis dividend.” In the contemporary crisis context, leaders can hardly expect any dividend at all. Even if they are granted emergency powers, even if press coverage is supportive or muted, and even if parliament supports extraordinary measures, leaders cannot get away with radical reform if they do not at least try to build support for them among their constituencies. Crises end. Sooner or later, politics as usual imposes itself, and veto players will resume their positions.

The intricate interplay of objective and constructed features in contemporary crises suggests the management of public confidence is a leadership challenge in itself. But telling the public that government is fully in control and that risk-management policies are by and large effective is

hardly an option when the sparks have started flying. In previous times, government leaders could safely assume public sympathy in times of duress. Today, they have to battle to (re)obtain it. Instead of assuming that most crises still generate the rally-around-the-flag effect, as seen in the United States following September 11, leaders must entertain the alternative scenario: When crisis generates a search for political culprits, advocating reform is easily construed by critics as a cheap strategy for avoiding blame.

Lesson 3: Crisis-induced reform creates exceptional challenges for the long term.

It is easier to get a reform package accepted than to get it implemented—decades of implementation research have taught us this lesson. The administration of reform programs is a long-term process that generates complex problems for administrative leaders. Contrary to popular expectations, as we have shown, crises do not make these problems disappear. On the contrary, crisis-induced reform is often a product of centralized and rapid decision making. Due process makes way for procedural shortcuts; crisis rhetoric masks implementation dilemmas. Whereas successful reform leaders take the time to placate anyone who may become involved during the implementation stages, crisis decision making tends to be exclusive. The “appreciative gap” that separates policy makers from implementers is not bridged, but widened (Boin and Otten 1996). As soon as the sense of crisis urgency passes, leaders will have to deal with this gap.

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Notes

1. When we speak of leaders, we refer to the people in senior positions in governments and public organizations, whether they are political appointees or career bureaucrats. We do not claim to speak about tactical leaders at the operational level of crisis response (Flin 1996).
2. The exception may be the reform of disaster policy and regulation in the wake of a disaster. Professor Quarantelli has pointed out to us that large-scale disasters sometimes do lead to improved disaster planning.
3. Resilience may be a feasible alternative to crisis prevention (Wildavsky 1988). In short, leaders must make efforts to strengthen organizational or societal capacity to bounce back after the inevitable crisis occurs.

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