

Leadership in Times of Crisis

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Leadership is complex and challenging at the best of times. In times of crises it can be particularly difficult to discern the right approach to take and the right call to make. And of course, the impact of decisions made in these times are vast and far-reaching.

I have been on both sides of decision-making in times of security-related crises. Living through a period of revolution, conflict and instability in a country where I was managing a business that sponsored the visas of a large number of expat workers, I was impacted by the decisions made by my leaders, and impacted others with decisions that I made for the business. There was also ample opportunity for me to observe the decisions made by other like-minded organizations in the country. I have since taken on greater organizational responsibilities which have involved working through similar events with members as their leader rather than the one in the crisis situation.

It can be tempting to create strict policies and procedures for times of crisis especially when it involves the security of our members. Not only is this what is recommended by some security experts, but in our litigation-driven Western culture this seems the most prudent way of not only protecting the members but also the organization. Though we do have a responsibility and a desire to provide responsible care for our members, we also recognize that planting churches among unreached people groups will require sacrifice. This is evident not only in Scripture but also as we look at the history of the church. Indeed, Paul writes that we 'have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him' (Phil. 1:29, NLT).

Many times strict policies can cause additional trauma. Having experienced an evacuation myself, I can attest to the stressful impact that it has on a family. And yet many times evacuation is mandated by policy when it would be possible, and less traumatic, to hibernate. That is, staying inside the house or other safe location for a period of time while monitoring the situation. While that may not be possible in an emergency, many of the crises that we experience in cross-cultural outreach emerge in ongoing periods of instability and difficulty. These are the circumstances I focus on here.

Additionally, we must be mindful of what we are communicating to the local believers who do not have an easy option of leaving the country when they face persecution, or encounter turmoil in their country. Sometimes they might feel that it

would be better for us to withdraw either for our own sakes or because we draw too much attention to them. Other times we may need to model that it is a privilege to suffer for Christ.

In my opinion, while detailed procedures and blanket policies are easier to apply, a better approach is individualized decisions made between the leader and each member unit (whether a single, married couple or family) in the crisis situation. There are so many factors that differentiate each unit's situation and determine their unique ability to weather the crisis. Obviously, this also depends on the crisis itself. A war zone with unpredictable aerial bombings is very different from a revolution with isolated protests and marches which can be avoided.

Taking this approach requires more from those in leadership. First of all, it requires a calmness and an ability to resist making reactionary decisions. Though decisions in crisis situations sometimes need to be made very quickly, many times they do not. A crisis is not always an emergency, and the perception that speed is always required can lead to poor choices based on insufficient information.

A leader should also be well-connected and assimilate information from as many sources as possible. For a leader in the same country, this would mean gathering data and advice from sources within the indigenous population as well as the foreign community. Of course, it is also important to evaluate the information that is collected according to the source. The 'intelligence' that a buddy's cousin's brother-in-law gathered by listening to his barber's speculation during his recent salon visit probably should not have as much bearing on decisions as information from a source who associates with middle or high-level government employees or other influential people. Building relationships with the latter is a wise measure which must begin years before the crisis occurs.

It is more difficult for a leader outside of the country to be as informed about the dynamics and mechanisms of the internal politics and culture that come to bear on the crisis situation. Following news reports is a good place to start. In countries with open or disguised dictatorial rule, however, the ruling party often increases their constraints on the press as instability rises. This makes it difficult to distinguish which reports are the most truthful. Leaders in this situation must lean on the connections of the members in the country and ask for guidance in choosing which reports to give the most consideration.

Leaders also have to be discerning. Determining how a member unit is handling the situation and when it becomes too much for them to handle is very difficult. Truthfully, we are not always honest with ourselves, let alone our leadership, for a variety of reasons. Perhaps we have become the proverbial frog in the pot of boiling water or maybe we feel that we are 'failing God' if we cannot endure the hardship with which we are faced. As much as possible the leader should seek more perspective by talking to both spouses in the case of a married couple as

well as others that can share perspective on the state of the member unit. This is especially important when leading from a distance and requires a sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit along with prayer.

Part of discernment is identifying whether the member unit is well-positioned to endure the crisis, and the greater risk level that accompanies it, or whether they should leave the country. An initial question to wrestle with is whether the member has a strong reason for taking the risk. This is not so much of an issue for a lower-risk crisis as we know that just sharing the hope that is within us involves a level of risk that both the members and organizations have accepted in order to proclaim this message. As the risk level rises, though, an evaluation must be made as to whether the impact is greater than the potential consequences.

Longevity and experience in the country and culture (or in a near culture) is an important factor as well. Seasoned members understand the undercurrents of the culture and politics more deeply, have a better grasp of the language, and enjoy relationships with local friends that have been built over years. They are better equipped to persist through a crisis than newcomers who would not know the best local person to call for help nor how to express their need in that country's vernacular.

Leaders must also discern whether or not the member has a good understanding of the danger they are facing. Those who ignore the reality of the threat are much like my great-grandfather who, because he did not see any curved land from his window, maintained his perception that the earth was flat and defended this position until he died. It is dangerous to ignore the larger events in the country simply because they have not yet had direct effects on a member or organization. Members with unrealistic perceptions of the risk who are allowed to remain in unstable conditions are likely to become victims themselves.

Having an understanding of the danger, members must also make a conscious decision to accept the risk to remain through the crisis. Leaders should discuss with them the potential impact on their family, the possibility that communication or transportation options could be cut off and any other considerations specific to the crisis.

There are a number of organizations who now train their members how to survive various crises they might encounter in cross-cultural environments. This type of training is also available through independent training companies. Being that it is so readily available, there is no reason for members to stay through an ongoing crisis without the benefit of security training. Additionally, leaders should confirm that members are modifying their lifestyle sufficiently in order to mitigate the risk appropriately. Of course, this will look differently in each situation but it highlights the need for leaders to complete security training as well so that they will have an

awareness of the principles involved and can evaluate the measures being taken by their members.

Though strict, blanket policies may cause as much trauma as they prevent, supportive policies are an important part of an organization's preparation for and response to the inevitable crises that occur. Policies requiring members to attend security training, perform risk assessments and develop contingency plans are valuable and exhibit the care that we desire to provide for our members. These procedures should leave room for evaluation of the situation as the basis for determining the best course of action rather than dictating a set course of action that must be adhered to.

Leadership in times like these is challenging. However, if we are to be true to the pioneering spirit of the disciples and the generations of cross-cultural Gospel proclaimers, we must be willing to support the decisions to stay by those who are well-positioned to endure the crisis knowledgeably and effectively. We must be ready to explain the rationale behind decisions for one unit to remain while another is asked to leave and accept potential frustration and misunderstanding. After all, we have been warned – not only that we will face such challenges but that they are necessary for the kingdom to be established among every people group on the earth.

‘Dear friends, don’t be surprised at the fiery trails you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad – for these trails make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world’. (1 Peter 4:12-13, NLT)