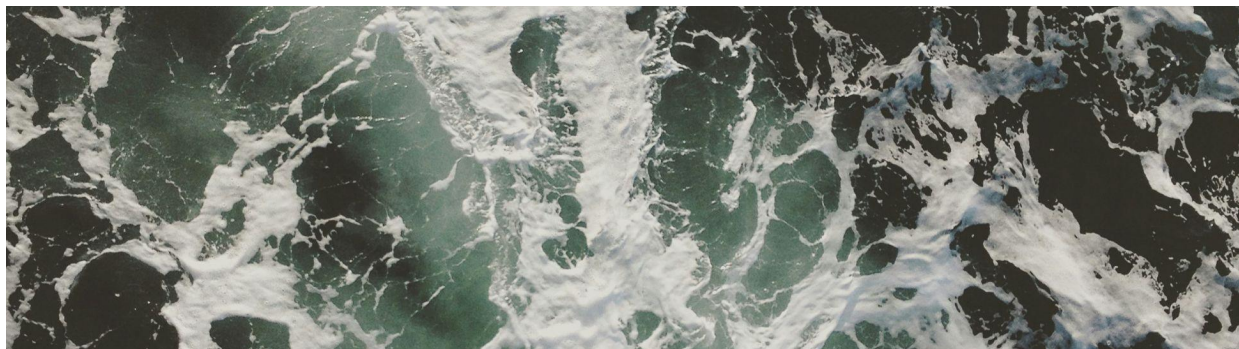




Guide: Leading in Crisis and Urgent Uncertainty



Leading in Crisis & Urgent Uncertainty:

A Quick Guide for Non-Profit & Public Sector Leaders

Updated: September, 2025

Introduction

In times of crisis, leaders are often thrust into situations that demand immediate action, strategic thinking, and the careful use of power. More than ever, our communities and organizations are operating in and on the edge of multiple crises. Leaders are asked to act with urgency and thoughtfulness, to support others to do the same, and to know the “right” thing to do even when the path is unclear.

While there’s no single answer to all the challenges we face, there are practices for making our efforts less guesswork and more strategy. Drawing on our experience from decades of work with organizations and leaders from across the non-profit and public sectors as well as leadership and complexity theory, we have created a **short practical guide** for leaders navigating the turbulence of crisis and uncertainty.

This guide is designed to provide you with practical, clear steps to help you identify the kind of crisis you are facing and navigate it effectively, regardless of your starting point. Our aim is to provide you with a usable framework you can apply when chaos strikes. It offers principles to follow, pitfalls to avoid, and an invitation to use crisis as a catalyst for learning and growth.

The Steps

- [Step 1: Breathe and Ground Yourself](#)
- [Step 2: Assess the Situation](#)
- [Step 3: Respond Accordingly](#)

Step 1: Breathe and Ground Yourself

The first and most critical step in any crisis is to *breathe*. A regulated, grounded leader is essential for effective decision-making. By taking a moment to connect and regulate, you set the stage for clearer thinking and reduce the risk of reactive, impulsive actions that could escalate the situation.

“The moment I got the text that said that we had lost our charitable status, my mind was racing. I had to slow down and take a few moments and not react right away. Ten minutes of pausing wasn’t going to worsen the situation, but it was going to let me get my wits about me. Taking a moment to breathe helped me get my brain back online.”

Don’t underestimate how important and helpful this step is! Return to it as needed. Taking a moment to breathe also gives the people you are supporting a moment to breathe as well.

Step 2: Assess the Situation

After grounding yourself, assess the nature of the situation. Different situations require different kinds of responses and strategies, so before deciding how to act, ask yourself, “What is happening here”?

We offer two practices you can use to quickly reflect on the nature of a particular crisis. These are tools we have found especially helpful and easy to remember and ask when assessing the nature of a crisis situation. They won't tell you everything about your situation, but they'll give you a better sense of what kinds of strategies and solutions might make sense. The more you practice these outside of a crisis situation, the easier it will be to apply them quickly when a crisis happens.

Ordered, Complex, or Chaotic?

The first tool comes from the [Cynefin framework](#) (kuh-nev-in). Out of this framework, there are three broad contexts your crisis can fall into. (Different aspects of your situations can also fall into different domains, so keep that in mind!)

Domain	Examples
Ordered crises are well-defined, predictable, and familiar. They have clear cause-and-effect relationships and known or knowable solutions. These are the problems that we can anticipate and have clear protocols and plans in place for. When they happen, we can reach out to experts to intervene and help us resolve them, or apply known best practices and standard operating procedures. Once these problems are solved, we know it and can move on. Learning from any challenges and keeping our protocols and procedures up-to-date can help us have an organized and well-guided response to comparable crises in the future.	● Health and safety incidents ● Building failures like leaks or damage from weather or accidents ● Technology failures <i>"During the pandemic we had to change our computer set-up to account for people working remotely. Now we're much better prepared."</i>

Complex crises don't have straightforward solutions, or well-defined problems with clear cause-and-effect. Multiple things are happening at once, all connected in different ways. Like shifting sands, as one thing changes, other things change too. Strategies that work one time don't the next. Even people with relevant expertise and knowledge will say "it depends" when we ask what to do. These problems tend to ebb and flow more than stop and start, and can rear up again in new forms. However, we can get better at handling these situations through experience and practice. By trying many small experiments and noticing what happens, we can start to feel the underlying patterns and rhythms and develop guiding principles and loose practices to adapt as we go. By involving the perspectives of many people and creating the conditions in which they can experiment, try things, and learn together, we can build up the capacity of our organizations and communities to "ride the wave" and continue adapting to emerging and unforeseen complexities in the future.	• Shifts in political and social context, like changes in government policies and priorities • Loss of funding or critical relationships that sustain the organization • Changes to staffing and staff relations • A scandal or communications crisis • Community conflict that affects the ability of your organization to operate <i>"Coming through COVID lockdowns, we realized we are not 'snapping back'. We are too slow in responding to our new circumstances."</i>
Chaotic crises might start as an ordered situation that went off the rails or a complex situation that escalated into something unmanageable or might just come out of nowhere. In these situations, the priority is to "stop the bleeding" by taking rapid, decisive actions to prevent further harm and restore some level of stability. Fortunately, chaos is generally temporary, though resolving the chaos does not necessarily end the crisis. Leaders must impose constraints and establish immediate order before they can begin to analyze the situation and transition into more strategic responses. Once the chaos is under control, leaders can move into reflection, learning, and adapting to the ongoing situation, including assessing fallout and if there's anything to prepare or plan for in the future.	• Natural disasters • Violence • A fire or building collapse • A public relations crisis that goes viral • An unanticipated public health emergency <i>"When the pandemic started, we had to make quick decisions. My pregnant partner was a medical professional working on the front lines. My brother's industry collapsed. My work changed overnight."</i>

Don't think of these domains as categories that your situation has to fit neatly into. They are more like different terrains, with their own natures and requirements for safe travel. Being lost in an unfamiliar building, where there are signs and floorplans and people you can ask for help (*ordered*), is different from being lost in unmarked, trailless

backcountry where you need to be very sensitive to your immediate context while also following some general principles for safety and survival (*complex*). Both of those are also different from being lost in any of these places during a fire (*chaotic*), where you need to react quickly to ensure your immediate safety.

Some situations are less easy to categorize. Cities have maps and signs and people, like a building, but are also as sprawling and emergent and changeable, like the wilderness. Being lost in a city might be an ordered crisis that needs an ordered strategy (consulting the map app on your phone for directions to a desired location) or a complex crisis that benefits from a complex strategy (picking a direction to walk and seeing where you end up), depending on whether you are trying to make an appointment on time or become confident navigating a new setting.

Some quick questions you can ask yourself to assess your crisis situation (or different aspects of a bigger situation):

- Is there an expert who could tell me what to do? Can I name that expert and where I'd find them? Is this a problem that's been solved by someone before? Do I know where to find the solution? (*If yes, probably **Ordered***)
- Is this something that has a lot of ambiguity around it or is hard to pin down to just one cause or issue? Are there many people and interests involved, and potential implications beyond the immediate situation? Is it going to require a lot of consent and cooperation to do anything, beyond the authority of one person or organization? (*If yes, probably **Complex***)
- Is harm or danger imminent? Is the situation too unstable or dangerous for any other kind of action beyond immediate response? (*If yes, probably **Chaotic***)

While the nature of these situations is different, the internal emotional experience we have while encountering a crisis can often be the same: fear, overwhelm, anxiety, anger, frustration, despair, grief, panic, and so on. Part of assessing the situation is to make sure we aren't confusing a situation that *feels* chaotic (and therefore requires an urgent and immediate response) with one that actually needs a different strategy, like consulting established procedures (*ordered*) or experimenting with small actions to see what happens (*complex*). Or, vice versa, failing to react swiftly to a crisis that actually

does require urgency and immediate stabilization, and thereby further amplifying the chaos and eroding trust and confidence.

In Cynefin, not knowing which domain your situation is in is called “Confusion”. The risk of this state is that we respond based on what feels most comfortable to us, or on how we *want* the situation to be and not how it is. If you can’t tell what kind of situation you are in, stop and gather more information first.

How Much Do People Agree and How Much Can You Act?

So what if the situation feels like a little bit of everything? Or if you have a general idea of the domain you are operating in, but need a bit more guidance in thinking through the implications? Here are two other questions we can ask ourselves to immediately and practically assess the nature of the situation we’re in:

- How much agreement is there about what’s happening and what to do?
- How much ability do I have to influence this situation?

1) Agreement: How Much Do People Understand and Align on What’s Happening?

“In our office during an earthquake, some people felt it and some didn’t so people were responding in different ways and no one agreed on what to do. This was despite practicing our earthquake emergency response the week before!”

Agreement isn’t just formal consensus. It’s about shared perception:

- Do people understand what’s going on?
- Do they agree on the nature of the crisis?
- Is there a shared sense of what to do next?

Low Agreement

Agreement

High Agreement

In low-agreement situations, people may be working from different assumptions, experiencing the crisis differently, or actively disagreeing about what’s needed. This

isn't necessarily bad. Particularly in complex situations, having multiple perspectives will help you discover different pathways of action. In high-agreement settings, there's enough shared understanding to coordinate action. This will be especially useful in more ordered problems, where an expert may be able to provide an immediate answer, even though others are unclear about what the problem is.

2) Control: How Much Can You Act?

"I've been given the responsibility to go from zero to 'sustainable' in a brand new program in a complex situation where I have no control of anything and very limited funding and resources. People are really starting to value what we're offering, but there's no guaranteed funding for the future."

This isn't just about formal authority. The umbrella of control includes:

- How much can I directly influence what's happening? Am I positioned to act?
- How much accountability or responsibility (formal or informal) do I have to act?
- Do I have the necessary knowledge, tools, resources, access, and capacity?

Low Control

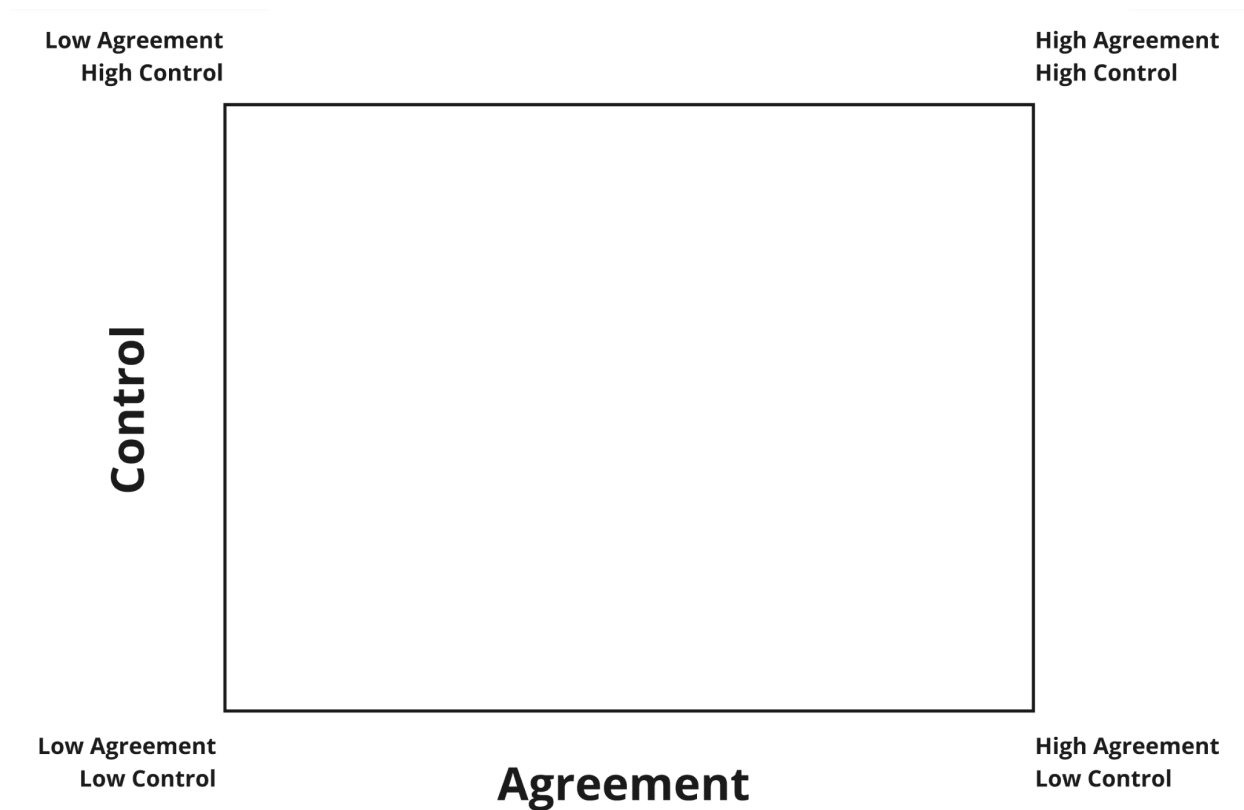
Control

High Control

Low control can lead to hesitation or distress, especially if you feel responsible but disempowered. High control allows for more direct action, but also calls for discernment.

The Agreement x Control Landscape

Placing your situation along these two spectrums gives you a simple landscape to help decide your next move.



You won't always have perfect information. That's okay. This tool is not about finding the "correct" space in the landscape. It's about helping you slow down, reflect, and choose your next best step.

Ask:

- How much agreement is there on what's going on?
- How much can I actually influence right now?
- What does this suggest about how I should lead?

Step 3: Respond Accordingly

Once you're oriented, move on to Step 3 and respond accordingly, with the level of intervention, leadership, control, or facilitation that the situation calls for. Each space on this landscape calls for a different leadership posture. If we generalize, each one can be characterized this way:

Top Right (High Agreement + High Control): Act confidently. Roles and plans are clear. Take the lead or support others who are doing so.

Top Left (Low Agreement + High Control): Slow down. You have the ability to act, but people aren't aligned. Use your control to create shared understanding before moving forward. Bring in experts if the situation can be addressed by them.

Bottom Right (High Agreement + Low Control): Support and coordinate. Even if you're not the key decision-maker, you can help align efforts, amplify communication, or clear obstacles.

Bottom Left (Low Agreement + Low Control): Pause and seek clarity. This is the danger zone. Don't act without understanding. Focus on listening, asking questions, and building alignment.

Quadrant	Common Situations	Good Starting Points
High Agreement, High Control "Let's go." You have the ability to act, and others agree on what's happening and what to do.	• Clear emergencies with established protocols • Operational issues where team alignment is strong • Planned transitions or known disruptions	• Act decisively and delegate as needed • Follow standard procedures or known practices • Communicate early and reinforce alignment • Support those already taking action
Low Agreement, High Control "Hold up, let's align first." You can act, but others are unsure or in disagreement about the crisis or response.	• Confusion about priorities or causes • Misinformation, multiple interpretations • Tension between departments or stakeholders	• Use your control to create shared understanding • Convene people for sensemaking • Clarify values, goals, and facts • Avoid rushing to solutions — listen first
High Agreement, Low Control "I see what's happening. How can I help?" You and others understand what's going on, but lack power, authority, or resources to act.	• Clear crisis outside your control • You're not the formal leader • You're waiting for resourcing or support	• Support the efforts of those who do have control • Communicate upward or outward clearly • Identify what small actions are within reach • Offer coordination, translation, or emotional support

Low Agreement, Low Control “Pause. Sense. Don’t rush.” You don’t fully understand what’s happening and neither does anyone else. No clear power, plan, or narrative exists.	• Sudden shocks (e.g., violence, collapse) • Emotional overwhelm or moral confusion • Fragmented, leaderless scenarios	• Stop and stabilize: prioritize safety • Ask grounding questions: What’s needed now? • Convene others to gather insight and start making sense
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What happens if your situation feels like it’s somewhere in the middle of one or both of these spectrums? For instance: an organization-wide crisis where everyone has a pretty clear idea of what the issue is and why it’s happening (high agreement), but you are only in charge of your team and what they’re doing (some control). In that case, pull from both quadrants. Identify what’s in your power to act on and do that while also connecting to find out where you can support others to respond.

Like the “Ordered-Complex-Chaotic” framework, this landscape isn’t a set of boxes that your situation will neatly sit in—it’s a vast terrain that your situation can spread across or move throughout as it evolves. Use the questions “How much agreement is there?” and “What can I influence right now?” to keep checking in and assessing the situation as you respond.

What else?

The remainder of this guide is about what else you will need to pay attention to as you navigate a crisis situation. There is no one-size-fits-all strategy and no simple checklist to tick off as you go. The purpose of naming these patterns and considerations is to jump-start your thinking and give you touchpoints that can be forgotten or overlooked in the swirl and overwhelm of a crisis.

Many of these touchpoints came from workshops where leaders told stories about real crises they’d experienced and together asked, “In these stories, what got in the way of responding well? What helped?”

What gets in the way of responding well?

Neglecting the Emotional Dimension

It's normal to have strong feelings in a crisis. When emotions overwhelm us, it can make it hard to respond or communicate with each other effectively. Rather than trying to control or ignore emotions (including your own), which often has the opposite result, acknowledge them and make space for people to feel as well as act. Don't expect people to be unaffected or for emotional responses to "make sense". Remember that people may need time and space to process their experiences during and after a crisis, and not everyone will have the same reaction or process in the same way.

"My community needed to declare a state of emergency because of a flood threat. We had to listen to what the experts were saying and communicate clearly while there was also lots of opinions and information (and misinformation) being shared over social media. We tried not to react to the naysayers and negative information, but people don't understand when they're scared."

Poor Communication and Transparency

Lack of clear communication during a crisis can make everything worse and do more damage to trust and confidence in the organization than the original situation. Leaders may hesitate to share information because they don't have clear information or the situation is dynamic and shifting rapidly. There can also be legal and policy reasons why certain information cannot be shared. On the other hand, sharing information that is inaccurate, confusing, irrelevant, or too much to handle is like sharing nothing at all. Communication should be thoughtful, tailored to audience and purpose, and provide what is essential and actionable. When specific information can't be shared because it isn't available or has to remain confidential, providing that context itself can be helpful.

"A beloved staff person needed to be fired. Due to privacy law and regulation, the real reasons for the dismissal could not be revealed to the rest of staff. Rumours circulated and a story emerged that wasn't anything like the real reasons for dismissal."

Imposing Control in Complex Situations

Introducing draconian measures can worsen an already complex situation. Recognize when to guide rather than command. Even when strong control is needed to prevent harm, do no more than is necessary to restore safe conditions. More challenges than we realize can be addressed by resourcing and supporting people to figure out and implement solutions themselves.

Over-Reliance on External Expertise

Hiring experts can be beneficial, but many crises require flexibility and learning that goes beyond a single skillset and perspective. Avoid overvaluing expertise at the expense of adaptability, learning, and attention to the immediate context of what is happening. While external technical experts can bring new insights and extra capacity, they cannot replace the expertise of people who are intimately familiar with the internal context of the organization. Learning organizations build capacity within for ongoing learning and growth.

Pre-Existing Challenges

Whatever problems exist before a crisis happens will also impact how that situation can be handled. Lack of trust and communication, strained or non-existent relationships among key partners, inadequate or poorly-implemented policies and processes, limited resources, overwhelmed or disengaged staff, and other such difficulties will hinder any leader's ability to respond effectively to a crisis. While not all crises can be planned for, organizations can prepare to handle the unexpected better by addressing internal challenges proactively wherever possible.

"We found out someone in our organization had been acting unethically and illegally. He wasn't criminally charged, but there was a history of this behaviour across other organizations. It was revealed to us third-hand, so we had to investigate and figure out what to do. There were no policies in place for how to deal with something like this."

What helps us respond well?

Situational Awareness and Decision-Making

When faced with uncertainty, take a moment to increase your situational awareness. You will always have to act without a complete picture, but you can gather as much information as possible, including consulting with those at every level of the organization, including those affected by your decisions, to give you a better picture of what is going on. Think about who has access to good information that will help you make timely decisions and pay close attention to what happens after you act.

Navigating Power and Control with Integrity

In crises, the ethical use of power is key. A key leadership challenge is to find the right space between taking too much control and abdicating your responsibilities. Effective leaders need to be prepared to step in with extraordinary measures and also know when to release control once stability returns. Ensure that your actions and decisions are ethically consistent and align with the organization's guiding values and the well-being of your team. In a crisis, you will act in new and different ways, but your organizational values can help guide your choices. Acting ethically will build confidence and trust in the integrity of the organization as well as lead to more thoughtful and wise decisions even under difficult conditions.

Creating Space for Self-Organization in Complexity

In complex scenarios especially, empower teams to self-organize. Support risk-taking and learning while guiding them toward solutions. Your role is to act as a convener rather than a controller, setting the conditions for your team to create and test their own solutions effectively. This might involve:

- Providing clear information and context.
- Offering support and resources.
- Removing obstacles to collaboration.
- Protecting your team from external pressures while they experiment with solutions.
- Generating collective sensemaking and shared purpose.

Transitioning from Chaos to Complexity

A crisis is not a static situation. Many crises will have an acute phase (often chaotic) followed by a period of transition (often complex). Successfully navigating a crisis means knowing when to transition from a chaotic response to a complex, adaptive approach. As stability emerges, loosen constraints and shift focus from immediate action to exploration and learning. This transition is a delicate balance: releasing power when it is no longer justified while remaining involved to support your team's efforts.

Engaging in Reflective Practices and Growth

Leadership in crisis involves continual learning. Build a regular practice of reflection to strengthen your decision-making:

- Conduct “after-action reviews” post-crisis to understand what worked, what didn't, and what could be done differently.
- Integrate reflective practices into regular operations to prepare for future crises.
- Make time to reflect on your personal response as a leader.

Crisis can create opportunities for organizational redesign. Use the lessons learned to build more resilient systems and processes. Create a culture that embraces uncertainty and adapts to changing circumstances. Use the [Leading in Crisis Workshop Guide](#) included in the appendix to host reflective conversations in your organization.

Putting It into Action – Your Crisis Management Checklist

Here's a simplified checklist to use during a crisis:

1. **Breathe:** Ground yourself to think clearly.
2. **Assess the Situation:** Ordered, complex, or chaotic? How much agreement? How much control?
3. **Respond Accordingly:** Use the appropriate strategy based on the nature of the situation.

Concluding Thoughts

This guide is not a one-size-fits-all solution but a starting point for navigating crises effectively. By staying grounded, assessing situations accurately, managing power ethically, and promoting self-organization, you can lead your team through crises in a way that addresses immediate challenges and fosters long-term resilience and growth.

Remember, your role as a leader is to be both a stabilizer and an enabler – helping your team navigate uncertainty while creating the conditions for collective action and learning. Use this guide as a living resource, adapting its principles to suit your organization's unique context.

Appreciation & Acknowledgements

This guide was created by Chris Corrigan ([Harvest Moon Consultants](#)) and Ciaran Camman ([Camman Evaluation](#)).

Thank you to [posAbilities](#), [Kinsight](#), [Burnaby Association for Community Inclusion](#) and [The McConnell Foundation](#) for your ongoing support in building leadership capacity in the non-profit sector. Our appreciation also to all of the workshop participants who helped us refine and expand these tools and offered your own stories of leading in crisis.

Let us know if you would be interested in hearing updates about workshops or further versions of the guide on our [Future Offerings form](#).

Header image of the swirling waters around Tsawwassen, BC by [Hitting Up Studios](#) on [Unsplash](#).

If you want to print a copy of the guide, check out the [print-friendly version](#).



Print-Friendly Version

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This guide is designed to provide you with practical, clear steps to help you identify the kind of crisis you are facing and navigate it effectively, regardless of your starting point. Our aim is to provide you with a usable framework you can apply when chaos strikes. It offers principles to follow, pitfalls to avoid, and an invitation to use crisis as a catalyst for learning and growth.

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“The moment I got the text that said that we had lost our charitable status, my mind was racing. I had to slow down and take a few moments and not react right away. Ten minutes of pausing wasn’t going to worsen the situation, but it was going to let me get my wits about me. Taking a moment to breathe helped me get my brain back online.”

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Some quick questions you can ask yourself to assess your crisis situation (or different aspects of a bigger situation):

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While the nature of these situations is different, the internal emotional experience we have while encountering a crisis can often be the same: fear, overwhelm, anxiety, anger, frustration, despair, grief, panic, and so on. Part of assessing the situation is to make sure we aren't confusing a situation that *feels* chaotic (and therefore requires an urgent and immediate response) with one that actually needs a different strategy, like consulting established procedures (*ordered*) or experimenting with small actions to see what happens (*complex*). Or, vice versa, failing to react swiftly to a crisis that actually *does* require urgency and immediate stabilization, and thereby further amplifying the chaos and eroding trust and confidence.

In Cynefin, not knowing which domain your situation is in is called "Confusion". The risk of this state is that we respond based on what feels most comfortable to us, or on how we *want* the situation to be and not how it is. If you can't tell what kind of situation you are in, stop and gather more information first.

How Much Do People Agree and How Much Can You Act?

So what if the situation feels like a little bit of everything? Or if you have a general idea of the domain you are operating in, but need a bit more guidance in thinking through the implications? Here are two other questions we can ask ourselves to immediately and practically assess the nature of the situation we're in:

- How much agreement is there about what's happening and what to do?
- How much ability do I have to influence this situation?

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Agreement

High Agreement

In low-agreement situations, people may be working from different assumptions, experiencing the crisis differently, or actively disagreeing about what's needed. This isn't necessarily bad. Particularly in complex situations, having multiple perspectives will help you discover different pathways of action. In high-agreement settings, there's enough shared understanding to coordinate action. This will be especially useful in more ordered problems, where an expert may be able to provide an immediate answer, even though others are unclear about what the problem is.

2) Control: How Much Can You Act?

"I've been given the responsibility to go from zero to 'sustainable' in a brand new program in a complex situation where I have no control of anything and very limited funding and resources. People are really starting to value what we're offering, but there's no guaranteed funding for the future."

This isn't just about formal authority. The umbrella of control includes:

- How much can I directly influence what's happening? Am I positioned to act?
- How much accountability or responsibility (formal or informal) do I have to act?
- Do I have the necessary knowledge, tools, resources, access, and capacity?

Low Control

Control

High Control

Low control can lead to hesitation or distress, especially if you feel responsible but disempowered. High control allows for more direct action, but also calls for discernment.

The Agreement x Control Landscape

Placing your situation along these two spectrums gives you a simple landscape to help decide your next move.

Low Agreement
High Control

High Agreement
High Control

Control

Low Agreement
Low Control

High Agreement
Low Control

Agreement

You won't always have perfect information. That's okay. This tool is not about finding the "correct" space in the landscape. It's about helping you slow down, reflect, and choose your next best step.

Ask:

- How much agreement is there on what's going on?
- How much can I actually influence right now?
- What does this suggest about how I should lead?

Step 3: Respond Accordingly

Once you're oriented, move on to Step 3 and respond accordingly, with the level of intervention, leadership, control, or facilitation that the situation calls for. Each space on this landscape calls for a different leadership posture. If we generalize, each one can be characterized this way:

Top Right (High Agreement + High Control): Act confidently. Roles and plans are clear. Take the lead or support others who are doing so.

Top Left (Low Agreement + High Control): Slow down. You have the ability to act, but people aren't aligned. Use your control to create shared understanding before moving forward. Bring in experts if the situation can be addressed by them.

Bottom Right (High Agreement + Low Control): Support and coordinate. Even if you're not the key decision-maker, you can help align efforts, amplify communication, or clear obstacles.

Bottom Left (Low Agreement + Low Control): Pause and seek clarity. This is the danger zone. Don't act without understanding. Focus on listening, asking questions, and building alignment.

Quadrant	Common Situations	Good Starting Points
High Agreement, High Control "Let's go." You have the ability to act, and others agree on what's happening and what to do.	• Clear emergencies with established protocols • Operational issues where team alignment is strong • Planned transitions or known disruptions	• Act decisively and delegate as needed • Follow standard procedures or known practices • Communicate early and reinforce alignment • Support those already taking action

Low Agreement, High Control “Hold up, let’s align first.” You can act, but others are unsure or in disagreement about the crisis or response.	• Confusion about priorities or causes • Misinformation, multiple interpretations • Tension between departments or stakeholders	• Use your control to create shared understanding • Convene people for sensemaking • Clarify values, goals, and facts • Avoid rushing to solutions — listen first
High Agreement, Low Control “I see what’s happening. How can I help?” You and others understand what’s going on, but lack power, authority, or resources to act.	• Clear crisis outside your control • You’re not the formal leader • You’re waiting for resourcing or support	• Support the efforts of those who do have control • Communicate upward or outward clearly • Identify what small actions are within reach • Offer coordination, translation, or emotional support
Low Agreement, Low Control “Pause. Sense. Don’t rush.” You don’t fully understand what’s happening and neither does anyone else. No clear power, plan, or narrative exists.	• Sudden shocks (e.g., violence, collapse) • Emotional overwhelm or moral confusion • Fragmented, leaderless scenarios	• Stop and stabilize: prioritize safety • Ask grounding questions: What’s needed now? • Convene others to gather insight and start making sense

What happens if your situation feels like it’s somewhere in the middle of one or both of these spectrums? For instance: an organization-wide crisis where everyone has a pretty clear idea of what the issue is and why it’s happening (high agreement), but you are only in charge of your team and what they’re doing (some control). In that case, pull from both quadrants. Identify what’s in your power to act on and do that while also connecting to find out where you can support others to respond.

Like the “Ordered-Complex-Chaotic” framework, this landscape isn’t a set of boxes that your situation will neatly sit in—it’s a vast terrain that your situation can spread across or move throughout as it evolves. Use the questions “How much agreement is there?” and “What can I influence right now?” to keep checking in and assessing the situation as you respond.

What else?

The remainder of this guide is about what else you will need to pay attention to as you navigate a crisis situation. There is no one-size-fits-all strategy and no simple checklist to tick off as you go. The purpose of naming these patterns and considerations is to jump-start your thinking and give you touchpoints that can be forgotten or overlooked in the swirl and overwhelm of a crisis.

Many of these touchpoints came from workshops where leaders told stories about real crises they'd experienced and together asked, "In these stories, what got in the way of responding well? What helped?"

What gets in the way of responding well?

Neglecting the Emotional Dimension

It's normal to have strong feelings in a crisis. When emotions overwhelm us, it can make it hard to respond or communicate with each other effectively. Rather than trying to control or ignore emotions (including your own), which often has the opposite result, acknowledge them and make space for people to feel as well as act. Don't expect people to be unaffected or for emotional responses to "make sense". Remember that people may need time and space to process their experiences during and after a crisis, and not everyone will have the same reaction or process in the same way.

"My community needed to declare a state of emergency because of a flood threat. We had to listen to what the experts were saying and communicate clearly while there was also lots of opinions and information (and misinformation) being shared over social media. We tried not to react to the naysayers and negative information, but people don't understand when they're scared."

Poor Communication and Transparency

Lack of clear communication during a crisis can make everything worse and do more damage to trust and confidence in the organization than the original situation. Leaders may hesitate to share information because they don't have clear information or the situation is dynamic and shifting rapidly. There can also be legal and policy reasons

why certain information cannot be shared. On the other hand, sharing information that is inaccurate, confusing, irrelevant, or too much to handle is like sharing nothing at all. Communication should be thoughtful, tailored to audience and purpose, and provide what is essential and actionable. When specific information can't be shared because it isn't available or has to remain confidential, providing that context itself can be helpful.

“A beloved staff person needed to be fired. Due to privacy law and regulation, the real reasons for the dismissal could not be revealed to the rest of staff. Rumours circulated and a story emerged that wasn't anything like the real reasons for dismissal.”

Imposing Control in Complex Situations

Introducing draconian measures can worsen an already complex situation. Recognize when to guide rather than command. Even when strong control is needed to prevent harm, do no more than is necessary to restore safe conditions. More challenges than we realize can be addressed by resourcing and supporting people to figure out and implement solutions themselves.

Over-Reliance on External Expertise

Hiring experts can be beneficial, but many crises require flexibility and learning that goes beyond a single skillset and perspective. Avoid overvaluing expertise at the expense of adaptability, learning, and attention to the immediate context of what is happening. While external technical experts can bring new insights and extra capacity, they cannot replace the expertise of people who are intimately familiar with the internal context of the organization. Learning organizations build capacity within for ongoing learning and growth.

Pre-Existing Challenges

Whatever problems exist before a crisis happens will also impact how that situation can be handled. Lack of trust and communication, strained or non-existent relationships among key partners, inadequate or poorly-implemented policies and processes, limited resources, overwhelmed or disengaged staff, and other such difficulties will hinder any leader's ability to respond effectively to a crisis. While not all

crises can be planned for, organizations can prepare to handle the unexpected better by addressing internal challenges proactively wherever possible.

“We found out someone in our organization had been acting unethically and illegally. He wasn't criminally charged, but there was a history of this behaviour across other organizations. It was revealed to us third-hand, so we had to investigate and figure out what to do. There were no policies in place for how to deal with something like this.”

What helps us respond well?

Situational Awareness and Decision-Making

When faced with uncertainty, take a moment to increase your situational awareness. You will always have to act without a complete picture, but you can gather as much information as possible, including consulting with those at every level of the organization, including those affected by your decisions, to give you a better picture of what is going on. Think about who has access to good information that will help you make timely decisions and pay close attention to what happens after you act.

Navigating Power and Control with Integrity

In crises, the ethical use of power is key. A key leadership challenge is to find the right space between taking too much control and abdicating your responsibilities. Effective leaders need to be prepared to step in with extraordinary measures and also know when to release control once stability returns. Ensure that your actions and decisions are ethically consistent and align with the organization's guiding values and the well-being of your team. In a crisis, you will act in new and different ways, but your organizational values can help guide your choices. Acting ethically will build confidence and trust in the integrity of the organization as well as lead to more thoughtful and wise decisions even under difficult conditions.

Creating Space for Self-Organization in Complexity

In complex scenarios especially, empower teams to self-organize. Support risk-taking and learning while guiding them toward solutions. Your role is to act as a convener

rather than a controller, setting the conditions for your team to create and test their own solutions effectively. This might involve:

- Providing clear information and context.
- Offering support and resources.
- Removing obstacles to collaboration.
- Protecting your team from external pressures while they experiment with solutions.
- Generating collective sensemaking and shared purpose.

Transitioning from Chaos to Complexity

A crisis is not a static situation. Many crises will have an acute phase (often chaotic) followed by a period of transition (often complex). Successfully navigating a crisis means knowing when to transition from a chaotic response to a complex, adaptive approach. As stability emerges, loosen constraints and shift focus from immediate action to exploration and learning. This transition is a delicate balance: releasing power when it is no longer justified while remaining involved to support your team's efforts.

Engaging in Reflective Practices and Growth

Leadership in crisis involves continual learning. Build a regular practice of reflection to strengthen your decision-making:

- Conduct “after-action reviews” post-crisis to understand what worked, what didn't, and what could be done differently.
- Integrate reflective practices into regular operations to prepare for future crises.
- Make time to reflect on your personal response as a leader.

Crisis can create opportunities for organizational redesign. Use the lessons learned to build more resilient systems and processes. Create a culture that embraces uncertainty and adapts to changing circumstances. Use the [Leading in Crisis Workshop Guide](#) included in the appendix to host reflective conversations in your organization.

Putting It into Action – Your Crisis Management Checklist

Here's a simplified checklist to use during a crisis:

1. **Breathe:** Ground yourself to think clearly.
2. **Assess the Situation:** Ordered, complex, or chaotic? How much agreement? How much control?
3. **Respond Accordingly:** Use the appropriate strategy based on the nature of the situation.

Concluding Thoughts

This guide is not a one-size-fits-all solution but a starting point for navigating crises effectively. By staying grounded, assessing situations accurately, managing power ethically, and promoting self-organization, you can lead your team through crises in a way that addresses immediate challenges and fosters long-term resilience and growth.

Remember, your role as a leader is to be both a stabilizer and an enabler – helping your team navigate uncertainty while creating the conditions for collective action and learning. Use this guide as a living resource, adapting its principles to suit your organization's unique context.

Appreciation & Acknowledgements

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Let us know if you would be interested in hearing updates about workshops or further versions of the guide on our [Future Offerings form](#).



LiC Workshop Guide

Appendix: Running a Leading in Crisis Workshop

You can use the tools of this guide to have a conversation within your organization about leading in crisis. The exercise below is a version of the workshops that were used to develop and refine this guide.

Planning:

This design has been used with small- to medium-sized groups (~5 to 35 people). For even larger groups, allow for more time (especially in gathering and landscaping the stories). Allow 2-3 hours for this exercise, including time for breaks. Run in a space that will allow for large group conversation where everyone is together as well as smaller break-out groups of 2-5 for specific activities and conversations.

Materials:

- 30 copies of the [Story Gathering template](#) (see below)
- 6 copies of the [Pattern Harvest template](#) (see below)
- Pens and markers for writing
- Masking/painter's tape to create the landscape/clusters
- Sticky notes to annotate and label things (different sizes and colours for different uses)

Process:

Frame the conversation <i>10-20 minutes</i>	Begin with a clear purpose for gathering (e.g., <i>to talk about how we have handled crises in the past and how we can better prepare to handle crisis in the future</i>). Name why this conversation feels necessary to have. Invite people to check in with a question like, "Why is this conversation important to you?" For larger groups (more than 10 people), consider having people check in with the person beside them rather than having everyone go one at a time (unless you have lots of time). This is also a good opportunity to acknowledge that dealing with crisis situations is, by its nature, a challenging topic and that the purpose of conversations like these is to enable and build on the strengths and knowledge that people already have. Don't forget the first step of the guide: breathe and stay grounded!
Gather stories <i>40-50 minutes</i>	Using the prompt, "Describe a crisis situation you've experienced. What happened?", gather enough stories about different crisis situations that you will

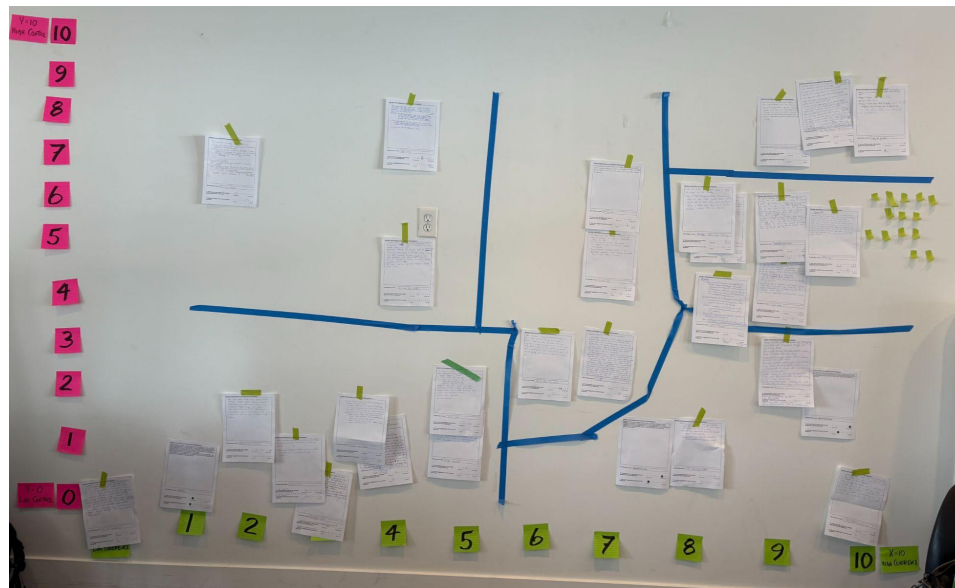
	be able to see clusters and patterns across them (at least 25-30). For small groups, people will need to share multiple stories. In larger groups, 1-2 per person will be enough. These should be stories from direct experience, not secondhand. They can be big or small, recent or from long ago, from inside your organization or from elsewhere. Let people know that it's okay to leave out or change any details that would be identifying or violate confidentiality and that the stories themselves do not need to leave the room. The easiest way to gather stories is have people split into pairs (with a group of 3, if odd numbers) and tell each other stories about crisis situations they've experienced. While one person is telling a story, their partner should write it down for them using the story gathering template (only the story, not name or ratings). After the story is told, give the filled-in template back to the person who told the story to give it a name and respond to the two rating scales. For very small groups (5-6 people), everyone can go in a circle taking turns sharing stories (make sure someone is still writing down the stories as you go!). For larger groups, once everyone has shared a couple stories in pairs, split up into groups of 4-5 and share at least one of the stories you told so that everyone gets to hear multiple stories. You can also gather stories in advance by meeting in pairs with copies of the story gathering template (or on their own, though it's often easier just to tell a story and have someone else write it down). If you do, leave time in the gathering for people to read out some of their stories as part of the process.
Landscape and cluster 20-25 minutes	<i>Note: This part of the exercise requires the most prep and has the most complicated instructions, so read all the guidance beforehand and make sure it makes sense to you.</i> Once everyone has at least one story, complete with a name and rating scales, map them on a landscape. Set the landscape space up ahead of time (such as while stories are being shared). Use a large open wall and, like the Agreement x Control landscape, make "Agreement" the x-axis (running horizontal across the bottom) and "Control" the y-axis (running vertical up the side). Use sticky notes labelled from 0 to 10 (11 per axis) evenly spaced to mark out the increments of each axis. Try to keep the vertical and horizontal axis similar in length (it can distort the patterns otherwise and make it harder to see meaningful clusters). You can also use the floor instead of the wall, or have people take their original story and write just the title and the X- and Y-ratings onto a sticky note and put those on the landscape instead (hang onto the story forms though! You'll need them once the clusters are identified). If you are working online, you can also use digital collaboration tools with whiteboard spaces like Miro or Padlet.

Once everyone has their named and rated stories (or sticky notes), show them how to use the X- and Y-coordinates they created with the two rating scales to place their story on the landscape. Remember: “X = across” and “Y = up”! Once all the stories are up, double-check that they’ve been put in the right spots and not swapped by accident. Some areas of the landscape will have more stories than others and it’s ok if they overlap a bit or spill out beyond the exact coordinates they have as long as it’s mostly clear what belongs where. (This is a good time to take a break and let people check out all the stories and see what’s grouped up with what!)

Once all the stories are up, use masking tape to mark off different zones where stories are bunching up together. There isn’t a right number of clusters, but with 25-30 stories, you’re likely to see at least 3 and probably no more than 5 or 6. Some zones might be very dense (like a whole bunch in the 0,0 to 1,1 zone for low agreement, low control) and others might be more diffuse (like a sprinkling of stories rated 9-10 on the agreement-axis but varying from 3-7 on the control-axis). There also might be some stories out on their own, like just a couple under “high agreement, high control”. Any of these can be valid clusters (a cluster should have at least 2 stories in it; for any with more than 10, see if there are subclusters you could break it into or just pick 4-6 stories to focus on).

For small groups or groups with lots of time to discuss, you can involve the whole group in deciding what the ‘zones’ of your landscape are. For very large groups or groups without a lot of time, whoever is leading the exercise can do this on behalf of the group. It can be helpful to label the clusters with letters (A, B, C, etc.) for reference, but don’t name them yet.

Example landscape with stories and clusters:

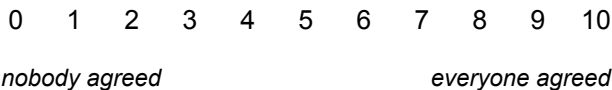


Harvest patterns <i>40-50 minutes</i>	Once all your clusters are identified (and it's okay if there are some outliers that don't end up being clustered—check in on them in the debrief and see if they add anything new to the discussion!), split up into groups of 4-5 and have each group pick a cluster to harvest from using the pattern harvest template (one per group). Each group will take the stories from their cluster off the landscape to work with. (If you want a photo of what the landscape looked like before, do it before this part! You can also put it together again using the coordinates.) If you have more groups than clusters, split up larger clusters between groups (each group needs at least 2-3 stories and 5-6 is better—if you have time, swap sets between groups partway through). If you have more clusters than groups, focus on the clusters you are most interested in, or, if you have time, do two rounds of harvesting (make sure there is still at least 30-40 minutes per cluster). For very small groups (5-6 people), work through each cluster together but split this process over multiple sessions to avoid fatigue. The template has all of the questions the group should be working through in the time given. Encourage them to take their time and start with reading and discussing the stories first, and leave the advice to the end. (To make sure they don't skip the advice altogether, you can also hand out three 4x6 inch sticky notes toward the end of the discussion time and ask for each piece of advice to be copied onto its own sticky note, which can then go up on the landscape with its cluster as part of the visual harvest.) Naming a cluster is often the trickiest part but it's very helpful to do as well!
Debrief <i>20-30 minutes</i>	For the final part of this exercise, gather everyone back together in one group. Begin with each cluster reporting back: 1) what their cluster was and what part of the landscape it came from (e.g., middle agreement, low control); 2) what they named their cluster and why; 3) what their three pieces of advice were. There can be some discussion after each cluster reports back, but make sure every group is heard. The harvest notes and advice sticky notes can also go back up on the landscape along with the stories they looked at. Once all of the groups have reported back, open up for more discussion and sharing. What similarities or differences did people notice across the different clusters? Were there any actionable insights that could be put into practice right now? Are there outliers or unexplored clusters on the landscape that still need some discussion? This can be a good opportunity to name the importance of matching the crisis response to the type of crisis situation (e.g., it means something different when we get overwhelmed by a completely unforeseen crisis from way beyond our control than one where our own in-house protocols and procedures failed miserably). You can share some of the other concepts and guidance from this guide to see how it aligns with what the groups discovered for themselves. Make sure to document anything actionable that comes from the discussion and follow up on it after!

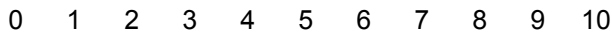
Describe a crisis situation you've experienced. What happened?

Give this story a name:

X - How much did the people in this situation agree about what was happening?



Y - How much control did you have over what happened?



no control

total control

Give your cluster a name:

What are the stories in your cluster?

In these stories, what do you notice about...

What gets in the way of responding well?

What helps people respond well?

What are three pieces of advice you can take from these stories on how to better prepare for/respond to situations like these?
(Write these out as specific actions or principles to practice.)

#1:

#2:

#3:

