

LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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What leadership behaviors work best in a crisis?

Here is what worked for me and the U.S. embassy community after we were bombed by al Qaeda operatives on August 7, 1998. I was the ambassador and chief of mission. My community included Kenyan and American employees, their families, Nairobi city residents and in-country U.S citizens.

A truck bomb exploded in a small parking lot in the back of our building. Immediately, the seven-story office building next door collapsed. Hundreds of people were buried in rubble.

Two hundred and thirteen people died, including 12 Americans, and 5,000 people were wounded. The embassy suffered 50% casualties. Those who made it out of the death trap organized themselves. They returned as first responders to find the dead, tend to the wounded and ultimately remove body parts of colleagues.



August 7, 1998 – My colleague rushes me toward help shortly after al Qaeda operatives bombed the U.S. embassy in Nairobi.

Most of the Americans chose to remain in Nairobi. With our Kenyan colleagues, we re-constructed our organization, we assisted city residents at large, and, we helped one another heal. This is what I learned about leadership.

1. BE PRESENT. PROJECT CALM. STAY CONSISTENT. PROVIDE CLEAR INFORMATION. LEADERSHIP IS NOT ABOUT YOU.

I could not take away pain, sorrow, anger, or trauma. But, I could accompany. Using our radio network to address the community the first night I said: “we will get through this and we will get through this together.”

When I burned out from going to too many memorial services and actually became irritated when one came up unexpectedly, I truly understood – this was not about me.

2. ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS TO GET ACCURATE INFORMATION AND TO UNDERSTAND NEEDS. LISTEN CAREFULLY TO THE ANSWERS, ESPECIALLY DISSENT.

On day one we had to determine the extent of the disaster and accurately inform Washington of resource needs. We later asked and listened to set goals, assess our progress and adjust.

People who disagreed with me helped me make better decisions because they voiced different perceptions which led to better solutions.

3. DEMONSTRATE THAT YOU ARE PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST. TAKE CARE OF YOUR PEOPLE WITH INFORMATION, RESOURCES, AND MEANINGFUL GOALS.

In the days after the bombing, trained mental health counselors held debriefings for all employees. We published our mission goals in our weekly community newsletter. And, we held multiple town meetings. We insisted on no double standard in providing medical help and information.

4. DECENTRALIZE THE WORK. USE TEAMS AND MAKE SURE THEY CAN CONNECT WITH ONE ANOTHER.

The two years I had spent promoting inter agency teamwork and community paid off. People were accustomed to working together. Teams searched morgues and hospitals for our employees and informed family members of the status of loved ones.

Over the next few months, they reconstructed our organization, managed our assistance programs for Nairobi residents, and created an effective “new normal.”

5. WATCH OUT FOR CRISES EMERGING FROM THE CRISIS: PUBLIC BLAMING; MEDIA CRITICISM; RESOURCE SHORTAGES; TURF AND “WE”/“THEY” ISSUES; SCREW-UPS.

Three different aircraft with rescuers and supplies had mechanical difficulties. For two days we were on our own. Local media accused us of racism. International media swarmed in and out. Unhelpful visitors from Washington added to our workload. Traumatized people required attention. We needed to deal with it.

6. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF. MAKE SURE OTHERS ARE DOING THE SAME TO GET THROUGH THE LONG HAUL.

Tired leadership is almost as depressing as no leadership. I swam to tend to my body. I gardened to bring joy to my spirit. My brain needed a change so I learned Spanish (for my next post).

I created a public mantra: “be kind to yourself and be kind to one another.” Show them what it looks like by practicing kindness yourself.

7. PERSEVERE.

The process of trying increases the odds of success and serves as a comfort should you fail. At the end of my posting, ten months after the bombing, mission community held a surprise party for me and gave me a ten-foot carved wooden giraffe which graces the living room today.

The message I took was “we’re OK; you did good; go in peace.”



8. DO NOT WAIT FOR A FORMAL LEADERSHIP POSITION TO LEAD. TRY IT. IT'S FUN.

If something needs doing in your world, get a group together and do it. I found the process of setting and achieving meaningful goals rewarding and fulfilling.

Had we waited for somebody to tell us what to do in Nairobi, we would have lost lives. Instead, we accomplished what at first seemed unimaginable.