Crisis Leadership:

Bushfires + COVID19 - A new model emerges

Dr Catriona Wallace
CEO & Founder,
Ethical AI Advisory

A Story of Crisis

During the Summer of 2019 Australia was hit by a crisis – the wildfires destroyed 46 million acres of land, 34 people were killed, 1 billion wildlife perished and 6,000 properties were incinerated.

In March 2020, just as Australia entered the 'recovery' phase of the fires crisis, it was hit by a second crisis, this time a global crisis – enter COVID-19.

As Australians we now know what a crisis looks like, what it smells like, what it feels like. It's like a war zone. So, we are in a crisis of the most extreme kind and the question on many minds is - who are the Crisis Leaders and what should they be doing?

"Many of the most needed leadership styles, now and in the future, are those used more frequently by women than by men."
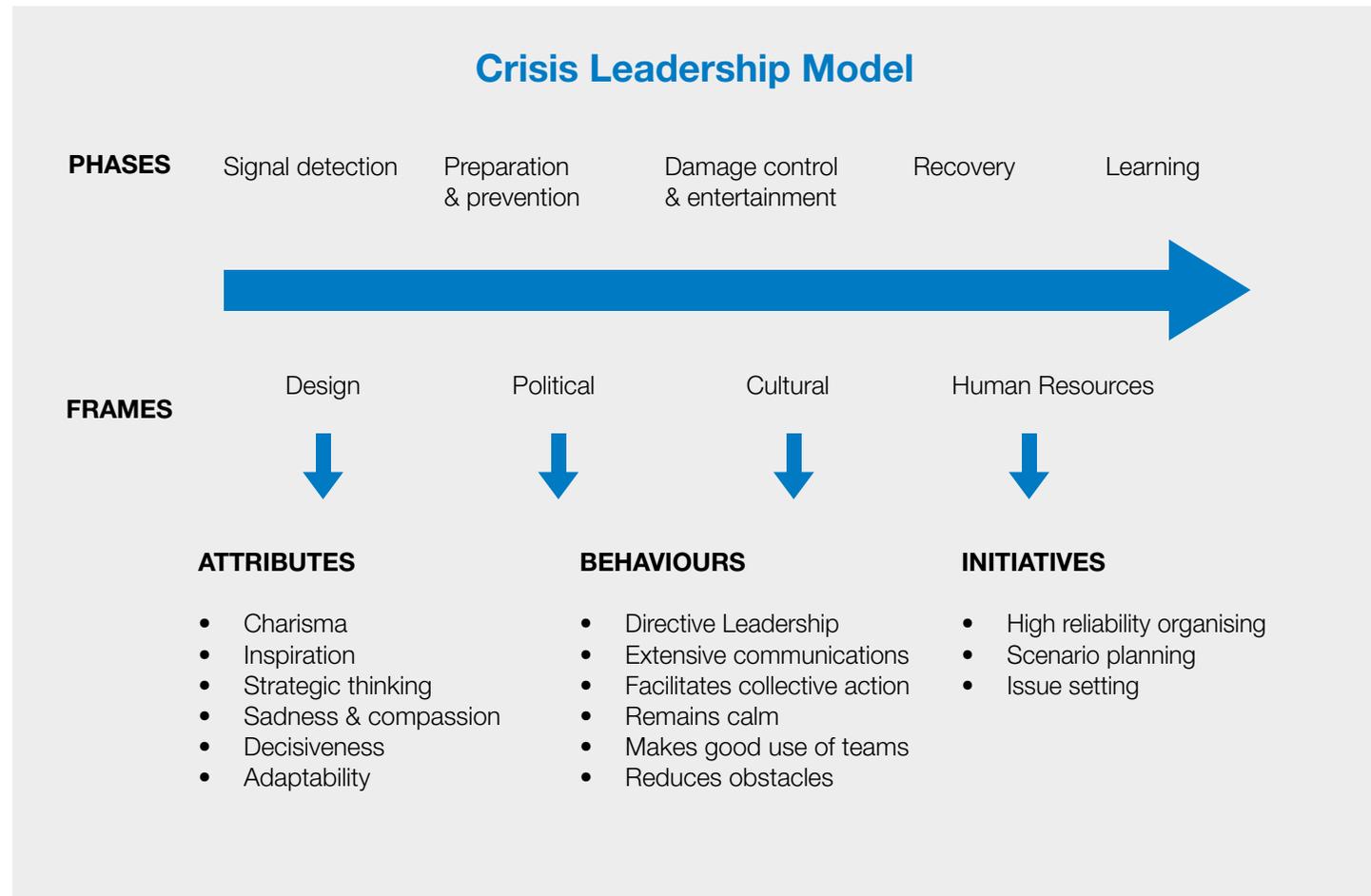
McKinsey, 2009

Crisis Leadership

Crisis Leadership is described as the ability to direct and effectively reduce the duration and impact of extreme situations. It focuses on multi-level strategy with multi-level contingencies and communications, clarity of vision, explicit and actioned values, effective logistics and building empathy and caring relationships (Johnson, 2018).

A Crisis Leader is someone who leads others through a sudden and largely unanticipated negative and emotionally draining circumstance (Barton, 2013). The Crisis Leader has the job of protecting lives, jobs, creating organisational resiliency and managing public opinion.

A traditional model of Crisis Leadership may have the following characteristics:

Figure 1: Consolidated Crisis Leadership Model

Crisis Leadership Model

PHASES: Signal detection | Preparation & prevention | Damage control & entertainment | Recovery | Learning

FRAMES: Design | Political | Cultural | Human Resources

ATTRIBUTES
- Charisma
- Inspiration
- Strategic thinking
- Sadness & compassion
- Decisiveness
- Adaptability

BEHAVIOURS
- Directive Leadership
- Extensive communications
- Facilitates collective action
- Remains calm
- Makes good use of teams
- Reduces obstacles

INITIATIVES
- High reliability organising
- Scenario planning
- Issue setting

What have we learned so far about Crisis Leadership?

The noun crisis comes from the Latinised form of the Greek word 'krisis', meaning 'turning point in a disease; a point at which change must come.' Similarly, the derivation of the word 'apocalypse' means 'an unveiling.'

So, what did we learn and what was unveiled during the Summer of 2019 and Autumn of 2020? We learned that leadership at the most senior levels has not closely adhered to best practice crisis leadership models, attributes or behaviours. Evidence suggests that our Federal leaders denied facts, did not consult with experts, were not prepared, could not contain the situation and prioritised political and image related agendas.

The result with the fires was mass devastation on a scale not seen before in this country and the result with COVID-19 is yet to fully play out. Certainly the politicians and government response to the Coronavirus is improved on the leadership performance related to the fire crisis.

We have however seen, at State and local levels, with exemplars like NSW Premier, Gladys Berejiklian, Victorian Premier, Daniel Andrews, evidence of effective crisis leadership. The behaviours displayed by these people included: strategic thinking, political agenda management, wide and diverse consultation, decisiveness, adaptability, vulnerability compassion and collective action.

A call to action for a new Crisis Leader

The multi-crisis mode demands that a new leadership model emerges.

Based on what we have learned thus far, comes a revised model of Crisis Leadership behaviour that ideally will position our leaders to better handle new crises, including COVID-19 and others that will most certainly come:

Figure 2: A New Model of Crisis Leadership Behaviour

New Crisis Leader Attributes

1. Deep empathy
2. Vulnerability
3. Compassion
4. Strategic thinking
5. Knowledgeable re advanced technology
6. Values diverse input
7. Visionary

New Crisis Leader Behaviours

1. Signal detection
2. Political agenda management
3. Interest group management
4. Data driven critical thinking
5. Multi-cultural lens communicator
6. Actions human and environmental factors

Whether dealing with an environmental, social, health, economic or organisational crisis, through leaders displaying the behaviours outlined in this model, we should have great hope that crises could not only have their impact minimised, they could be avoided altogether.

We hope that leaders will emerge from the current COVID-19 crisis who will be competent signal detectors, political agenda managers, can set issues and mobilise collective action, who use data-driven critical thinking and advanced technology and who understand multi-cultural and multi-stakeholder lenses. These leaders can be vulnerable, highly empathetic and will create a vision that people will follow out of crisis.

All of these skills are now required as we face into the next crisis, the economic impact of multiple crises, and how we lead our organisations through this time to the unveiling of a better, healthier and safer future, hopefully.

Ethical AI Advisory
+61 412 181 284
info@ethicalai.ai
Level 11, 68 Alfred Street, Milsons Point NSW 2061

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