



What Should Every Leader Know? Crisis Intuition

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Based upon a September 2017 webinar presented by Firestorm Principal, Guy Higgins

[Watch the recorded webinar.](#)

Firestorm is America's Crisis Coach® and we have assisted individuals and organizations in situations ranging from the Virginia Tech shootings to crises within local governments. We assist clients in the public and private sectors and schools and businesses alike.

The contents of this brief focus on leadership responsibilities and summarizes key points made during a webinar with Firestorm Principal, Guy Higgins.

About Guy Higgins: Firestorm Principal Guy Higgins is committed to the importance of planned resilience in the face of disruption or crisis. He assists companies and organizations to plan for and achieve breakthrough performance, even in the face of disruptions and disasters that can severely cripple their ability to conduct business or put them out of business entirely.



Guy Higgins
Firestorm Principal

Leadership Under Pressure – The story of Earnest Shackleton

In 1914, [Ernest Shackleton](#) assembled an expedition in England, intended to sail south to the Antarctic Continent and then cross the continent on foot. After departing the British Isles, Shackleton sailed to the Falkland Islands where he planned to replenish supplies for his final preparation for the voyage to Antarctica. While on the Falkland Islands, he was warned that the journey to Antarctica would be dangerous due to the unusually cold and stormy preceding winter and spring. He disregarded the local advice and continued his journey to the Arctic. Due to the cold weather that should have been anticipated, Shackleton and his men became locked in sea ice, which eventually crushed their ship. Shackleton led his entire crew across the sea ice, dragging a ship's longboat and emergency supplies, to Elephant Island where he chose five men to accompany him on a 1000-mile voyage through the Antarctic Ocean back to the Falkland Islands where he organized a rescue operation, sailed back to Elephant Island and did rescue the remainder of his crew – losing no one.

After his ship was destroyed, Shackleton exhibited incredible leadership in the moment; but was it necessary? He was knighted for his leadership during the voyage; however, such superhuman leadership and achievement should have not been required.

Leadership should be exercised ***before*** a crisis, having thought of the 'what if?' scenarios. Planning must be conducted to prepare for situations that are unexpected – a step Sir Ernest did not take.

Case Studies – A comparison

In each of the following case studies, the following points are taken into consideration:

- The pressure leaders were under (e.g. situation, press, stakeholders)
- Decision making – easy or difficult?
- Ethical challenges
- Managing consequences



Malaysia Air Flight MH370 versus AirAsia

In March 2014, [Malaysia Air Flight 370](#) disappeared after leaving Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Since Malaysia Air is a nationally sponsored airline, the government announced, on television and radio, that a flight had disappeared. The behavior of Malaysia Air and the Malaysian government following the disappearance indicated that neither had planned for how to respond to a situation such as they encountered. The days following the disappearance were filled with speculations, assertions, unfounded rumors and many corrections/back-tracking. The media spoke to anyone with an opinion, spreading additional wild assertions. The Malaysian government responded through press conferences and press releases – they did not succeed in being either transparent or in managing consequences.

Both the government and the airline were under tremendous pressure. Hundreds of people disappeared on their watch, and the true story of events *never* became clear. Every communication appeared forced and the airline and successive government-relayed messages failed to clarify the situation. The consequences to Malaysia Air were enormous, and the airline is still suffering from those consequences today – in brand, reputation and reduced ridership.

In contrast, following the Malaysia Air incident, AirAsia, a low-cost airline, [suffered a crash](#) halfway through a two-hour flight. AirAsia knew for certain the plane crashed; however, they did not know if there were any survivors. Following the AirAsia crash, the cause was not quickly determined. Speculation led to thoughts of terrorism, mechanical failure, pilot error or weather-related causes. Upon losing contact of the plane, the airline began contacting everyone who was at the departure point. They checked the manifest and identified emergency points of contacts for passengers. Additionally, they contacted the destination airport and explained the situation. AirAsia established operations control at the departure airport and offered to fly everyone involved to the departure airport to facilitate communication, support victims' families and enhance the airline's management of their response.

The CEO of AirAsia flew to the departure airport to personally speak with family members and stakeholders. He committed to keeping all informed with the most up-to-date information, but stated he would not speculate or provide information that was not substantiated to the best of his ability. He

spent several days speaking with each person individually while the unknowns were resolved. He fulfilled his obligations and responsibilities to family members of the deceased and stakeholders.

AirAsia recovered from the effects of the crash with a restored reputation and brand. Contrasting the two, Malaysia Air did not appear to implement a plan when their plane went missing. It appeared that AirAsia **did** execute a trained and exercised plan that was understood by everyone involved.

BP versus Chevron

In April 2010, a British Petroleum oil-drilling rig, the [Deepwater Horizon](#), exploded, resulting in the death of 11 employees and a catastrophic oil leak. Like Malaysia Airlines, BP did not appear to have anticipated such a scenario, nor to have followed an exercised plan. Communications painted an inaccurate picture of the situation including only briefly touching upon the fatalities. BP leaders repeatedly expressed optimism about the magnitude of the spill and how quickly it would be contained. The spill was significantly larger than originally predicted and caused substantial environmental damage throughout the Gulf of Mexico; in addition to damages to tourism and seafood production. BP experienced intense pressure from the government, public, shareholders and major investors.

Decision making was difficult, but the response indicated the lack of an established and practiced plan. In response to a crisis that caused the death of eleven employees, the BP CEO [appeared on television](#) stating, *'no one was more concerned than he, and he only wanted his life back.'* BP continues to produce environmentally sensitive commercials in an effort to recover from the impact from the event in 2010.

In contrast to BP, Chevron communicated eloquently during a [2012 refinery explosion](#) in Richmond, California. The company immediately communicated via Twitter indicating what they knew at the moment and ensured they would continue to push updates when available. The focus remained on the safety of employees until they could confirm that no injuries or fatalities occurred. The company also recognized the environmental impacts of the explosion and tweeted their plans to mitigate those impacts.

Similar to BP and Malaysia Air, Chevron issued press releases, but they continued to communicate via Twitter. They interacted with the press and supported first responders who spoke to the media. Chevron's communication appeared to have been practiced well ahead of the explosion. They obviously thought of the ethical challenges that would arise from a crisis and planned responses accordingly.



LSU Evacuation/Chardon High School

In 2012, Louisiana State University issued a [campus-wide evacuation](#) order following a bomb threat. Although the initial communication was planned and coordinated, it was apparent that the plan had not been properly trained and exercised. Instead of walking off campus (which would have been most efficient), most students, staff and employees tried to drive their cars off campus, resulting in an hours-long traffic jam. The congestion prohibited emergency response vehicles from properly reaching the affected areas. Fortunately the bomb threat was a false alarm.

The same year of the LSU evacuation, Chardon High School in Cleveland, Ohio initiated a lockdown when a student [opened fire in the school's cafeteria](#). Days prior to the shooting, the high school had practiced their lockdown drill in case of an active shooter. Due to the training, the event lasted only a few minutes, ending with the student being disarmed. This scenario reiterates that *you are your own first responder*. Chardon, however, did not teach their students **not** to post to social media during a lockdown event and learned a lesson the hard way. Posting to social media can reveal hiding places to the intruder. Those who post online are putting themselves in danger. Additionally, media will share live updates with the world – whether accurate or speculation. An organization or school will almost certainly have a secondary crisis when false information is spread via the media. It is imperative to train students, employees and staff to remain invisible on social media during active shooter and intruder situations.

Avoid post-crisis mistakes like Malaysia Air, British Petroleum and LSU by planning and practicing **prior** to an event occurring.

Avoid Leadership Mistakes – Preaction

Before a crisis event arises, every leader should ask these questions:

- **What is the organization's strategy to handle events? The strategic discussion must include:**
 - Response
 - Recovery
 - Considerations
 - Legal
 - Regulatory
 - Ethical
- **What is the plan?**
- **Have we conducted training exercises?**

“DISASTER DENIAL IS ONE OF THE LARGEST BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE PREPAREDNESS. AN ORGANIZATION OR SCHOOL CANNOT ALLOW DISASTER DENIAL TO OCCUR.

-GUY HIGGINS

Barriers to Effective Preparedness

Leaders must address the following barriers to effective preparedness:

- Attitudes that include:
 - Disaster denial – “It won't happen to us.”

- “The plans we have are good enough.”
- “We’re good enough leaders; we don’t need plans.”
- Conflicting priorities – all organizations have priorities, but preparedness cannot be relegated to a low priority. Emergency and crisis events can endanger people and planning must have the right priority.
- Lack of resources – no organization has unused resources. When preparedness is not adequately prioritized, the development of plans can be under-resourced.
- Culture – leaders cannot allow a culture of ad hoc responses to emergencies and crises to restrict proper planning, training and practice.
- Lack of ownership – if no one in the organization “owns” preparedness, plans will not be accepted and executed well.
- Legal opinion – Firestorm has seen legal opinions that imply that no plan is a better legal defense than poor execution of a plan. That opinion is a barrier.

Overcoming the Barriers

In order to overcome barriers to effective preparedness, leaders must:

- **Be participative leaders:** Coordinate meetings with leadership from all departments to create a comprehensive crisis plan.
- **Communicate** with leadership board, team and employees. Explain the “What” and the “Why.”
- **Be transparent.**
- **Follow-through** with plans by conducting training exercises.
- **Create ownership.**

Leadership and Performance During Crisis

Professional athletes train to create muscle memory. Training for a crisis event should not be any different. Muscle memory is built by exercising plans. If conducted frequently, employees will develop a crisis intuition in times of disaster, rather than thinking through the entire reaction process in a cognitive manner. Intuition is faster, but it only works if one has experienced similar situations in training. Establishing crisis intuition builds confidence that leads to heightened performance.

Leadership Responsibilities

- During the Preaction phase, leaders must create:
 - The team
 - The plan
 - The experience
- During a crisis
 - “Muscle memory” takes over
 - No need for superhuman leadership

What Next?

Learn more about [Guy Higgins](#).

Contact us confidentially – webinars@firestorm.com

Related resources:

- [Behavioral Risk Threat Assessment – How do you stop bullying, suicide and guns before it's too late?](#)
- [Livestreaming, Sexting, Cyberstalking and Cyberbullying](#)
- [How Leaders Lead in a Crisis](#)

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