

What Makes a Leader?

Crisis management is the key

What sort of individual makes the best team leader? Pepperdine University conducted a survey of crisis management experts, and here are 14 characteristics they identified.

Contingency team and crisis management team leaders are highly specialized employees. They must possess both technical expertise and teamwork skills. During emergencies and crises, the demand on their skills is tremendous; contingency management and disaster recovery typically involve functioning despite time constraints, high stress, inadequate decision frames, and the necessity to carefully complete critically important tasks far beyond the duties of day-to-day workplace tasks team leaders typically perform. What are the attributes of an effective team leader? What sort of person, with what kinds of training and skill sets, represents the best type of individual to lead a contingency team in a crisis?

To help explore these questions, over one hundred crisis managers were asked to complete a survey questionnaire on crisis leadership factors. The survey asked these experts to think about leaders with whom they have worked, either on a crisis team or as part of a crisis situation. The respondents were also asked to provide examples of both “very good” and “very bad” leadership factors. These experienced crisis leaders represent a wide international selection and a diverse range of crisis management activities, including law enforcement, security, corporate aviation industry, and governmental agency crisis managers who have many years of crisis management and contingency team leadership experience.

These respondents provided a sketch of an effective leader, and the results indicate that there are at least 14 characteristics they should possess. Additionally, these results point out that a more effective leader in a crisis would possess more of these 14 traits and skills. These traits and skills should be given serious consideration when selecting team leaders and designing training programs.

According to this study, a great crisis or contingency team leader should be:

1. **Coordinated**

An effective leader has coordination skills. He or she should have experience, knowledge and/or training in how to get individuals to function together as a single unit. According to the respondents, a leader should have the ability to create team cohesion, team coordination, and integration.

2. **Decisive**

An effective leader should be able to make the right decisions during contingencies. Respondents to the survey said that inappropriate hesitation or reluctance to act undermined effective leadership.

3. **Experienced**

Leaders should have plenty of field experience to draw upon. The value of a seasoned veteran's experience is clearly indicated as a factor for effective leadership. Look for actual hands-on experience when selecting leaders. If everyone is a newcomer, it is imperative that the training regimen includes plenty of mock drills, simulations, and hands-on training to increase the experience level of the designated leader.

4. **Goal-Oriented**

Effective leaders have goal-setting abilities. They are skillful in layout out short- and long-term goals, setting specific objectives, making task assignments to meet those goals, and following through to achieve them.

5. **Able to Communicate**

Leaders provide and solicit key information, engage in two-way communication, and interact in open and honest ways with others. They have the ability to communicate successfully, with few misunderstandings, in a wide variety of contexts and situations.

6. **Able to Facilitate**

Effective leaders are not dictators. Rather, they are able to get the most out of team members by facilitating input from others, creating a situation in which the team makes decisions in a collaborative manner, fostering teamwork, and creating a sense of cohesion among all team members.

7. **Able to Handle Stress**

Clearly, crises, contingencies, disaster recovery, and emergency management situations can be very stressful. Those who do not manage stress successfully are often failures at leading during these situations. Emotional and mental stability is a prerequisite for effective leadership. An effective leader has the capacity to remain calm, stable, and focused during the most chaotic periods. A sense of stability must be maintained in order to keep recovery efforts on track during the stressful periods of a crisis.

8. **Able to Listen**

It is imperative that leaders be great and active listeners, with the capacity to digest a large amount of information and different perspectives. The effective leader practices and trains to listen, and has the capability to exert active effort to understand, process, and evaluate others' input.

9. **Open-Minded**

An effective leader is not dogmatic and “hard-headed,” but rather is open to differing viewpoints and perspectives. He or she is willing to “think outside the box” when considering solutions to contingency situations and has the ability to interpret and understand different ways of looking at an event.

10. **Responsible**

An effective leader takes ownership and responsibility for the resolution of a contingency. A leader should take responsibility for the team, support team ownership of the crisis response, and shield the team from inappropriate external interference. It is also important for the leader to ensure that the team as a whole gets recognition for success.

11. Able to Prioritize

An effective leader must have the capacity to recognize which tasks must come first and which can be delayed, retain a clear sense of priorities of both purpose and process, and have knowledge of when to follow and when to deviate from the plan. Effective leaders have a sense of balance to recognize what issues need to be tackled first and which ones are key to resolving their decisions and solutions.

12. Able to Think Critically

A leader should possess problem/solution analysis and critical-thinking skills. According to the survey respondents, an effective leader should have the capacity to define, analyze, and understand the unique complexities of each crisis. The leader should also be able to critically analyze possible solutions and envision both the intended and unintended consequences of each solution. This requires a leader to read the unique aspects of every situation and to have a great capacity to visualize what it will look like once it has been implemented.

13. Adaptive

An effective leader should have the capacity to adapt and respond to unique aspects of crises and changing circumstances. Inflexibility, rigidity, and inability to adapt severely limit the effectiveness of a leader.

14. Trained and Prepared

The value of addressing leadership as a development and training goal was clearly endorsed in this survey. To be effective, one must be prepared for the role of leader by being thoroughly knowledgeable of the organization's contingency plans and recovery operations; however, the leader should also be knowledgeable of the skills and capabilities of the members, the traits of all who are working on the crisis, and the overall purpose, function, responsibilities, and boundaries of the team during the crisis.

Many if not all of these 14 characteristics of effective team leaders can be taught and developed through supplemental training or continuing education. Consider sending team leaders to leadership development seminars or courses. In the event of a disaster or major disruption, the investment will prove to be well justified.

Will the Most Qualified Team Leader Please Stand Up?

An effective crisis team leader can:

- Coordinate
- Make Decisions
- Draw from Experience
- Set Goals
- Communicate

- Facilitate
- Handle Stress
- Listen
- Be Open-Minded
- Take Ownership and Responsibility
- Prioritize
- Think Critically
- Adapt
- Train and Prepare