

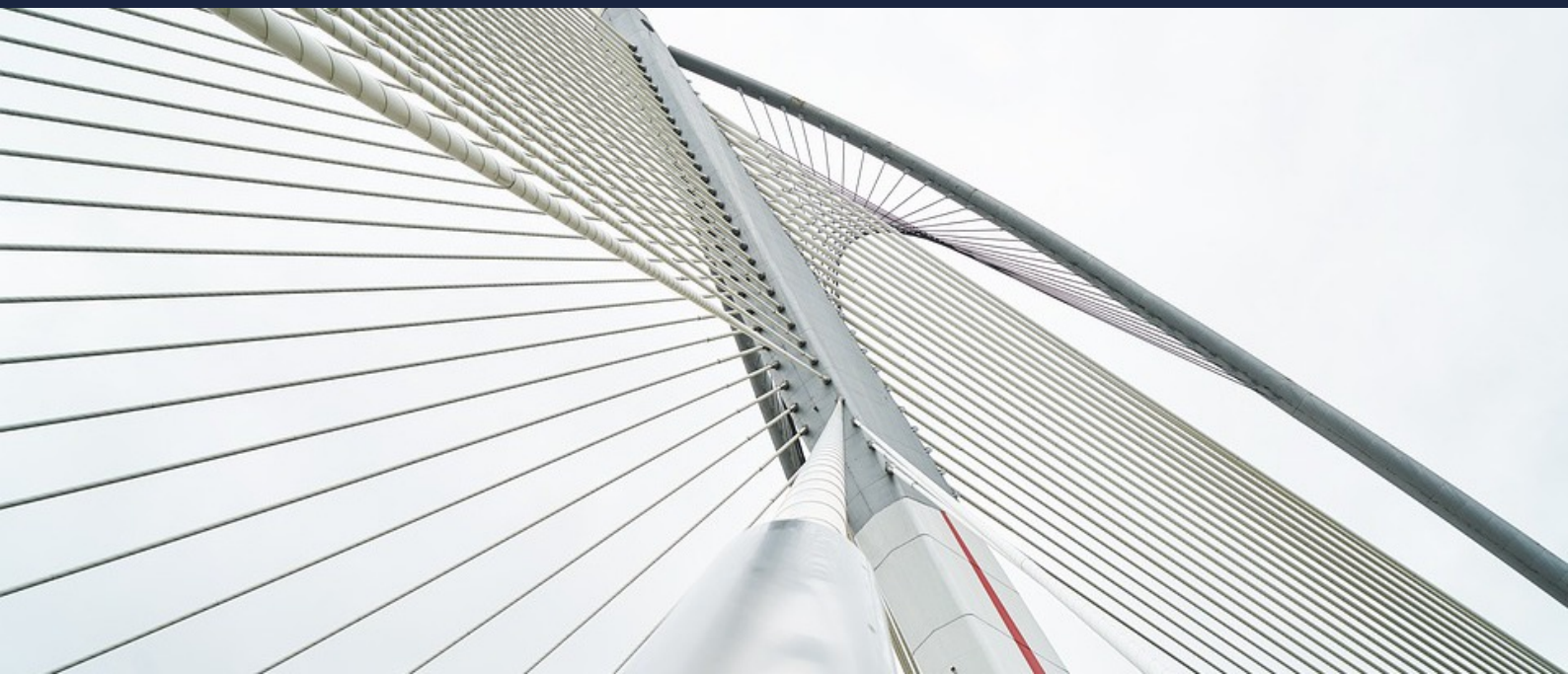
BEYOND THE CV

Leadership in Crisis Versus Leadership in Comfort — A Reflective Examination

A Practitioner's Perspective on Leadership Behaviour Under Pressure in the
Modern Organisation

Giovanni Leonardi

September 2020



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Leadership · No. 73

Originally written September 2020 | Re-edited and re-rendered for the WhereBeyond Edition, 2025

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1. The Test Nobody Prepared For

Six months ago, the operating conditions that most senior leaders had built their careers within vanished. The rhythms that structured their authority — the weekly leadership team meeting, the quarterly board cycle, the annual planning round, the carefully managed town hall — were replaced by daily video calls, improvised decision-making, and a level of uncertainty that no leadership development programme had prepared them for.

What has emerged since is a pattern that, while uncomfortable to discuss, is too consistent to ignore. The crisis has sorted leaders into two categories that do not map neatly onto seniority, tenure, or reputation. The first category contains those who have grown in stature — leaders who became more visible, more decisive, and more trusted as conditions deteriorated. The second contains those who have diminished — leaders whose authority has quietly eroded as it became clear that their competence was a function of the environment rather than a quality they brought to it.

This is not a story about good leaders and bad leaders. It is a story about the difference between leadership that is tested and leadership that is assumed.

2. The Comfort Thesis

In stable conditions, it is remarkably difficult to distinguish between a leader who is genuinely effective and one who is merely occupying a role in a system that functions well enough on its own. The organisation has established processes, experienced teams, and institutional momentum. The leader's contribution is, in many cases, to make decisions at the margin — approving budgets, resolving escalations, setting direction within well-understood parameters. These are real contributions, but they operate within a narrow band of difficulty. The system absorbs mistakes, compensates for indecision, and smooths over gaps in judgement.

The pattern I have observed over many years is that organisations systematically overestimate the individual contribution of leaders in stable conditions and underestimate the contribution of the system around them. Leaders are rewarded for outcomes that would have occurred regardless of who occupied the role, and this creates a population of senior leaders whose confidence in their own capability significantly exceeds the evidence base.

This is not a moral failing. It is a structural one. The feedback loops in most organisations are designed to attribute success upward and diffuse failure downward. The leader who presides over a successful programme is credited with its success; the leader who presides over a failing one can usually point to external factors, resource constraints, or inherited problems. Over time, this asymmetry produces leaders who genuinely believe they are the cause of the outcomes around them, because every signal they receive confirms it.

3. What Crisis Demands

Crisis strips away the system that produces this illusion. The established processes stop working. The experienced teams are overwhelmed or unavailable. The institutional momentum that carried decisions forward regardless of their quality reverses direction, and suddenly every decision matters in a way that is immediate and visible.

In these conditions, leadership requires a set of capabilities that are rarely tested in normal operations.

The ability to decide with incomplete information. In stable conditions, leaders can delay decisions until the data is sufficient, the analysis is complete, and the stakeholders are aligned. Crisis removes this option. The leader must act on partial information, accept that some decisions will be wrong, and create mechanisms for correcting course rapidly rather than waiting for certainty. The leaders who have thrived in the past six months share a common trait: comfort with provisionality. They make decisions explicitly framed as reversible, communicate the basis for the decision and the conditions under which it would change, and move on.

The ability to communicate when there is nothing reassuring to say. The most revealing leadership behaviour of the past six months has been communication. Leaders who defaulted to corporate messaging — carefully worded, legally reviewed, optimistically framed — found that their credibility evaporated almost immediately. Their teams could see that the situation was serious, and messaging that failed to acknowledge this registered as either dishonesty or disconnection. The leaders who retained trust were those who said, plainly, that the situation was uncertain, that they did not have all the answers, and that they would share what they knew when they knew it. This sounds simple. It is, in practice, extraordinarily difficult for leaders trained in a culture that equates authority with certainty.

The ability to be present without controlling. Crisis creates a gravitational pull towards centralisation. The instinct of many leaders has been to insert themselves into operational decisions that, in normal times, they would delegate without thought. This impulse is understandable — the stakes feel higher, the visibility is greater, and the

leader's own anxiety demands the comfort of control. But it is also destructive. Operational teams that have the knowledge and proximity to make good decisions are slowed or paralysed by a leader who insists on approving everything. The leaders who have navigated this most effectively are those who increased their visibility while reducing their control — making themselves available, asking questions rather than giving instructions, and trusting the judgement of the people closer to the work.

4. The Sorting

The uncomfortable reality is that the past six months have produced a sorting that most organisations have noticed but few have acknowledged openly. There are leaders whose standing has risen — not because they sought the spotlight, but because their behaviour under pressure revealed qualities that were always present but never tested. And there are leaders whose standing has quietly declined — not because they failed dramatically, but because the removal of stable conditions exposed a gap between their positional authority and their actual capability.

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This sorting is visible to everyone except, in many cases, the leaders themselves. Teams know who stepped up. They know who communicated honestly, who made decisions when decisions were needed, and who disappeared into a fog of delegated accountability. They also know who froze, who retreated into process, and who continued to manage optics when the situation demanded substance.

The question is whether organisations will act on what this sorting has revealed, or whether the return to stable conditions will allow the pre-crisis assumptions about leadership capability to reassert themselves. The pattern of the past suggests the latter. Organisations are structurally inclined to forget the lessons of disruption once the disruption ends, partly because remembering them would require confronting uncomfortable truths about the people who occupy senior roles.

5. The Institutional Memory Problem

There is a deeper issue at play. Most organisations do not have mechanisms for capturing what crisis reveals about leadership effectiveness. Performance management systems are designed for normal conditions — they measure delivery against objectives, assess behaviours against competency frameworks, and calibrate ratings against peer cohorts. None of these instruments are sensitive to the qualities that crisis exposes: the ability to lead without a playbook, to maintain trust under uncertainty, and to make consequential decisions at speed.

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The result is that the most valuable leadership data most organisations have ever generated — six months of observable behaviour under genuinely demanding conditions — will likely be lost. It will not appear in year-end reviews. It will not inform succession decisions. It will not reshape the competency frameworks that determine who gets promoted next. The leaders who proved themselves will carry the memory privately, and the leaders who were found wanting will be relieved to find that the institutional record does not reflect what everyone saw.

6. What This Means for How We Select and Develop Leaders

If we take the evidence of the past six months seriously, it suggests that the way most organisations identify, select, and develop leaders is calibrated for a world that no longer exists — if it ever did. The competencies that leadership frameworks emphasise — strategic thinking, stakeholder management, commercial acumen — are necessary but radically insufficient. They describe what a leader should be able to do in stable conditions. They say nothing about what happens when the conditions disappear.

The leaders who have distinguished themselves this year share qualities that are rarely assessed in selection processes and almost never developed in leadership programmes: emotional steadiness under genuine uncertainty, the discipline to resist the pull towards centralised control, the honesty to communicate without the safety net of corporate messaging, and the humility to acknowledge what they do not know without losing the confidence of their teams.

These are not qualities that can be taught in a two-day workshop or assessed in a competency-based interview. They are qualities that are forged over a career and revealed only when the conditions demand them. The task for organisations is not to train these qualities into existence — it is to recognise them where they already exist, to stop promoting people whose apparent competence is entirely a function of favourable conditions, and to create environments where leadership is tested before the next crisis arrives to test it for us.

The past six months have given every organisation a data set that most would pay dearly for in normal times: direct observation of how their leaders behave when nothing goes according to plan. The question is whether anyone will use it.