

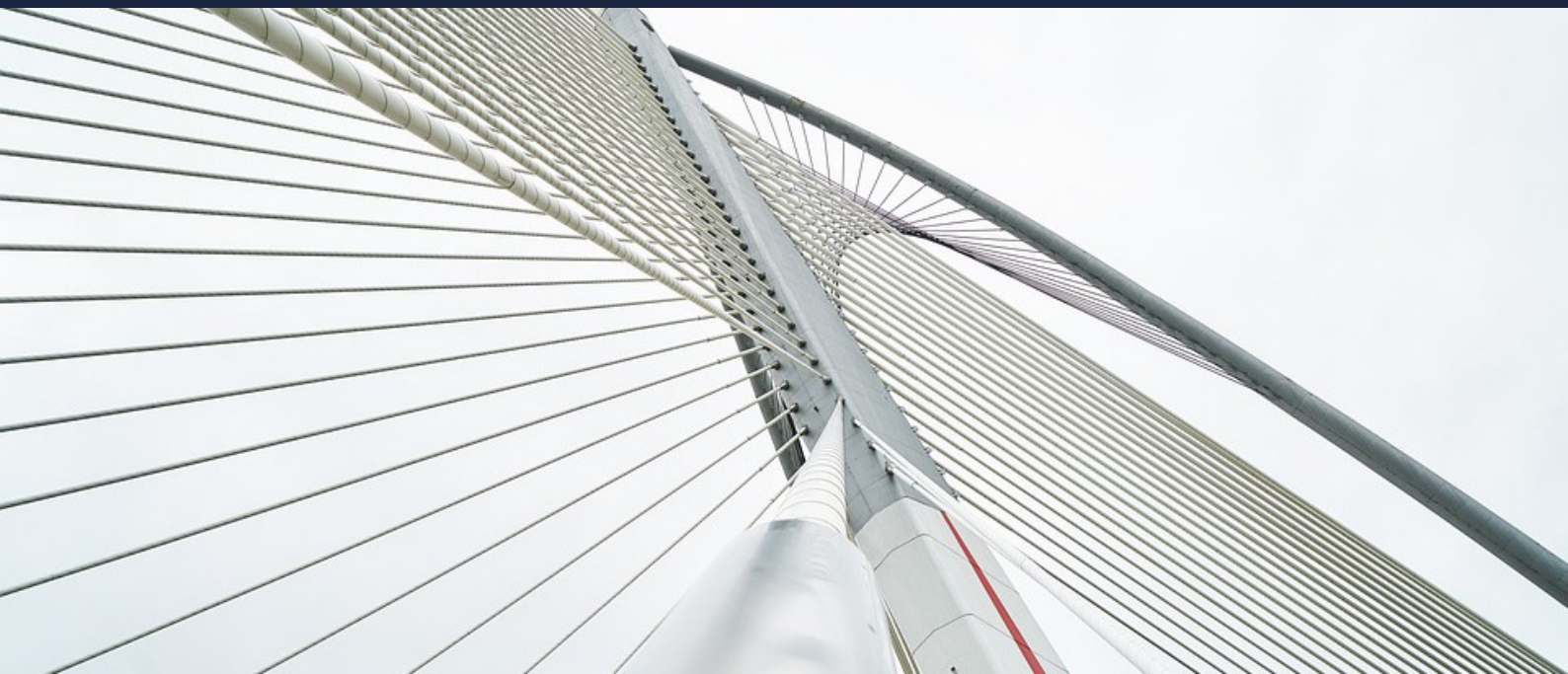
BEYOND THE TOWN HALL

Leadership in Crisis Versus Leadership in Comfort

A Practitioner's Perspective on Leadership Behaviour Under Pressure in 2020

Giovanni Leonardi

May 2020



Leadership in Crisis Versus Leadership in Comfort

Leadership · No. 69

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

“Crisis did not create new leaders. It revealed who had been leading all along and who had merely been presiding.”

The Reveal

Two months of crisis have done something that years of leadership development programmes, 360-degree assessments, and executive coaching could not: they have shown us who can actually lead.

This is not a comfortable observation, and it is not intended as one. The pattern that has emerged across sectors and organisations since March is stark and consistent. Some leaders stepped forward, made decisions under radical uncertainty, communicated with clarity, and held their organisations together through a period of genuine fear. Others convened meetings, requested more data, deferred to committees, and waited for the situation to clarify itself before committing to a position.

The difference between these two groups is not about experience, seniority, or even competence in normal conditions. It is about something more fundamental: the relationship between the leader and the act of deciding.

What Crisis Exposed

In stable conditions, organisations can sustain — and even reward — a style of leadership that is fundamentally about convening rather than deciding. The leader who builds consensus, who ensures all voices are heard, who commissions the analysis before taking a position, who manages stakeholders with patience and political skill — this leader thrives in environments where time is abundant and the cost of delay is low. Much of what passes for leadership in large organisations is, in practice, sophisticated facilitation.

Crisis strips that away. When decisions must be made daily with incomplete information, when the consequences of inaction are immediate and visible, when people are frightened and looking for direction — facilitation is not enough. What is required is the willingness to decide, to be wrong, to adjust, and to decide again. The leader must absorb uncertainty rather than distribute it, because distributing it — asking the team what they think, requesting another options paper, scheduling a workshop to explore the

implications — is itself a decision: a decision to delay, and everyone knows it.

In stable conditions, organisations can sustain a style of leadership that is fundamentally about convening rather than deciding. Crisis strips that away. What is required is the willingness to decide, to be wrong, to adjust, and to decide again.

The leaders who have performed most strongly in the past two months share a set of characteristics that are worth naming, because they are not the characteristics that most leadership frameworks prioritise.

They communicated frequently, briefly, and honestly — including about what they did not know. The instinct to wait until the picture was clear before saying anything was precisely the instinct that failed. People in crisis do not need certainty from their leaders; they need evidence that someone is paying attention, making judgements, and willing to be accountable for them.

They made scope decisions fast. The organisations that adapted most quickly were the ones where leaders identified, within days, what mattered and what could stop. Not through a structured prioritisation exercise, but through the exercise of judgement — the willingness to say this matters and that does not, and we will revisit if I am wrong.

They stayed visible. Not performatively visible — not the all-hands video message crafted by communications teams — but operationally visible: present in the working sessions, available for the difficult conversations, close enough to the delivery to know what was real and what was reported.

Crisis did not create new leaders. It revealed who had been leading all along and who had merely been presiding.

The Uncomfortable Implication

The implication for organisations is one that most would prefer not to confront: the leadership behaviours that were most effective in crisis are not the behaviours that the organisation's own systems select for and reward.

Promotion in most large organisations correlates with consensus-building, stakeholder management, political acumen, and risk avoidance. The leader who decides quickly, communicates bluntly, and acts before the analysis is complete is, in normal times, more likely to be seen as reckless than decisive. The systems are designed to produce the facilitative leader, and in stable conditions those systems work well enough. The question that the past two months have raised — and that organisations will need to answer honestly — is whether well enough in stable conditions is a sufficient standard for leadership selection when the conditions can change this fast.

This is not an argument against collaborative leadership or against evidence-based decision-making. It is an observation that the capacity to decide under uncertainty — to hold the weight of a decision that might be wrong, communicate it clearly, and move — is a capability that organisations need and are not systematically developing. It has been

treated as a personality trait rather than a professional skill, and crisis has exposed the cost of that assumption.

What Happens Next

The temptation, as the immediate pressure eases, will be to return to the familiar model. The consensus-builders will reassert the value of consultation. The governance structures will re-expand. The instinct to defer and distribute will re-emerge, because it is comfortable, because it spreads risk, and because it is what the organisational culture knows how to do.

Some of that return is appropriate. Crisis leadership is not sustainable leadership, and the qualities that serve well in an emergency — speed, directness, unilateral decision-making — can become liabilities in calmer waters.

But something has been learned that should not be unlearned. Organisations have seen what their leaders are capable of when the stakes are real and the time is short. They have also seen which leaders were not capable of it. That knowledge is valuable, and it would be a waste of a painful experience to set it aside in the relief of returning to normal.

The organisations that learn from this will not try to sustain crisis-mode leadership indefinitely. They will ask a different question: how do we build leadership cultures that can move between modes — that can consult and decide, that can facilitate and direct, that can distribute accountability when time allows and concentrate it when it does not? That is a harder problem than either extreme, and it is the one that matters.