

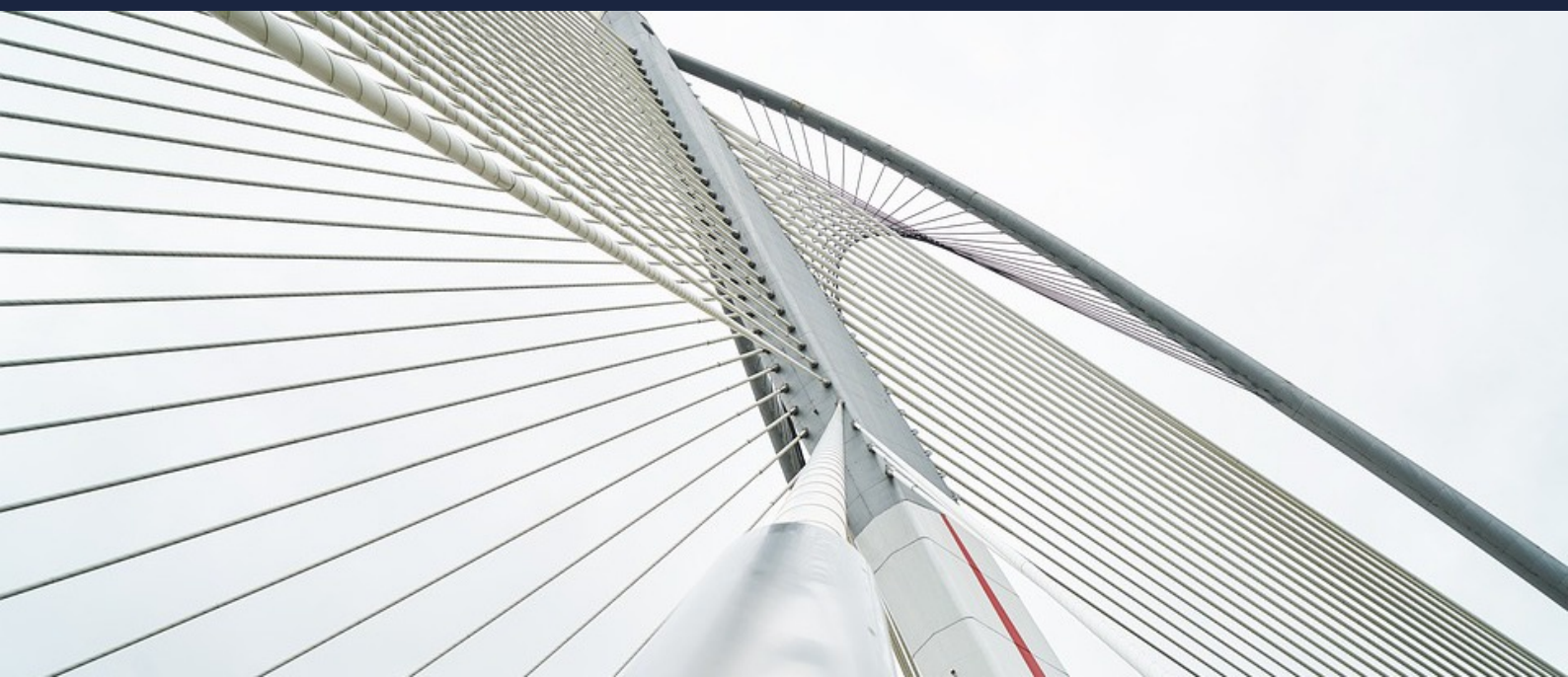
BEYOND THE COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK

Leadership in Crisis Versus Leadership in Comfort — The Distinction Nobody Wanted to See

A Practitioner's Perspective on What Genuine Uncertainty Reveals About
Leadership Capability

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“Crisis did not change who these leaders were. It simply made visible who they had always been.”

The Sorting Mechanism

Seven weeks into this crisis, a pattern has become unmistakable across every sector I observe. Leaders are being sorted — rapidly, visibly, and with a clarity that years of performance reviews and leadership assessments never achieved. Some have risen. Many have frozen. A few have simply disappeared from view, delegating upward in a crisis that demands the opposite.

What is striking is not that crisis reveals character — that observation is as old as leadership itself. What is striking is how thoroughly the pre-crisis signals of leadership capability have failed to predict who would perform under genuine pressure. The leaders who looked strongest in stable conditions — articulate in board meetings, confident in strategy presentations, assured in their command of data and process — are not reliably the ones leading effectively now. And the leaders who were sometimes overlooked — less polished, less visible, less comfortable with the rituals of corporate performance — are, in a significant number of cases, the ones holding their organisations together.

The Competence That Was Not Competence

The pattern I have observed repeatedly is this: a substantial proportion of what passes for leadership competence in large organisations is, in fact, a function of stable conditions. It is the ability to navigate known systems, to manage predictable stakeholders, to make decisions where the data is available and the consequences are bounded. These are genuine skills, and they are valuable. But they are not the same thing as the ability to lead when the systems are broken, the stakeholders are frightened, the data is absent, and the consequences of every decision are uncertain and potentially severe.

The crisis has exposed this distinction with uncomfortable precision. Leaders whose confidence was rooted in mastery of process have struggled when the processes no longer apply. Leaders whose authority derived from positional power have found that positional power means very little when everyone is operating from their kitchen table and the hierarchy has been compressed by urgency. Leaders who relied on data to make

decisions have been paralysed by the absence of reliable information.

What the crisis has revealed is not a failure of individual leaders, but a failure of the systems that selected and promoted them — systems that optimised for competence in conditions that no longer exist.

What Effective Crisis Leadership Actually Looks Like

The leaders who are performing well right now share a set of characteristics that cut across sector, seniority, and style. They are comfortable making decisions with incomplete information — not reckless decisions, but considered ones that acknowledge uncertainty rather than waiting for it to resolve. They communicate with unusual directness, saying what they know, what they do not know, and what they are doing about the gap. They have shortened the distance between themselves and the front line, seeking information from practitioners rather than waiting for it to be filtered through reporting structures.

Perhaps most importantly, they are visibly present. Not present in the sense of sending frequent emails or chairing additional meetings, but present in the sense of being reachable, responsive, and willing to engage with problems rather than delegating them. In my experience, the single most reliable predictor of effective crisis leadership has been the willingness of a leader to say I do not know, but here is what we are going to do next — a statement that combines honesty about uncertainty with a commitment to action.

The Leaders Who Froze

The leaders who have struggled — and this is a larger group than most organisations will publicly acknowledge — share a different set of characteristics. They have sought certainty before acting, waiting for data that will not arrive in time to be useful. They have retreated into process, convening committees and commissioning analyses as a substitute for decision-making. They have communicated in the cautious, hedged language of corporate risk management at a moment when their people needed clarity and conviction.

The most damaging pattern has been what I think of as upward delegation under pressure. Leaders who, in normal conditions, appeared decisive and autonomous have, under genuine stress, deferred every significant decision to the level above them. The effect cascades: if directors defer to the executive committee, and the executive committee defers to the board, then decision-making slows to the pace of the slowest governance layer at precisely the moment when speed matters most.

The Question That Will Define the Recovery

When conditions eventually stabilise, organisations will face a choice about what to do with what they have learned about their leaders. The temptation will be to forget — to allow the pre-crisis narratives of competence to reassert themselves, to treat crisis performance as an anomaly rather than a data point. This would be a mistake.

Crisis did not change who these leaders were. It simply made visible who they had always been. The leaders who froze under pressure were not suddenly diminished by circumstances; they were operating beyond the boundary of their actual capability, in a space that their previous experience and the conditions of their success had never required them to enter. The leaders who rose were not suddenly elevated; they were finally in conditions that demanded the qualities they had always possessed but that stable environments never tested.

The organisations that use this insight wisely will reconsider how they identify, develop, and promote leaders. Not by simulating crisis — that produces theatre, not insight — but by asking honestly whether the qualities that their leadership frameworks reward are the qualities that actually matter when certainty disappears. The answer, for most organisations, will be uncomfortable.