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Flipping the Switch

The Human Side of Crisis Readiness

by

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Introduction: Crisis Mode – A Personal Wake-Up Call

I recently spent a week in Ukraine, where daily life runs on both normalcy and constant crisis. Air-raid sirens wail with unnerving regularity, yet people have adapted: Many children now find school exams more stressful than the alarms[1]. War has, in a sense, become part of their "everyday life." This experience drove home a fundamental truth: **crisis readiness begins not in a manual, but in a person.** All the thick binders, checklists, and contingency plans in the world mean little if the humans responsible for them freeze or falter when a crisis strikes. In the end, crisis management *"lives and breathes through people"* – the tired, stressed, fallible humans who must make the tough calls under pressure[2]. It's people, not spreadsheets or AI, who will notice the first signs of trouble and decide what to do next.

When a crisis hits, **the clock starts ticking immediately**. Yet studies show most organizations struggle with timely action – taking an average of 21 hours to issue a meaningful external response, and in 18% of cases over 48 hours[3][4]. By that time, the narrative may already be running away from them: more than a quarter of crises make international news within one hour, and two-thirds within 24 hours[5]. Clearly, having a plan on paper is not the same as executing it in reality. The difference lies in human readiness: Who on your team will **"flip the switch"** into crisis mode, *when* will they do it, and *how* will they and their colleagues react in those critical first moments? This memo explores how people react when crisis strikes – the psychology, the pitfalls, and how deliberate practice (yes, drills!) can build the "muscle memory" to respond faster and smarter. The goal is to help organizations ensure that their crisis plans aren't just dusty documents, but *living* capabilities ingrained in their people.

The Human Factor: Why Crisis Management Is Profoundly Human

In theory, crisis management sounds straightforward: stay calm, follow the plan, communicate swiftly. In practice, it's **"messy, emotional, and profoundly human"**[6]. When the pressure is on, even seasoned leaders find that *managing people, not just*

plans, is at the heart of crisis response[6]. After all, **"spreadsheets don't get tired, but your crisis team definitely does"[7].** Humans feel fear, stress, confusion – especially if the crisis arrives at 3 AM when the team is running on vending-machine coffee and adrenaline.

Consider what often happens in a real crisis event: some leaders **freeze up**, paralyzed by the magnitude of decisions in front of them. Others swing to the opposite extreme – *"go full Napoleon,"* trying to control every tiny detail in a desperate bid for order[8]. Some well-meaning managers even decide that a crisis is the perfect time to rewrite protocols on the fly[8]. The results can be counterproductive or even comical: one crisis consultant wryly notes seeing panicked executives *micromanaging what sandwiches the response team should order* while big decisions languished[9]. Another common trap is **waiting for perfect information** – insisting on having *"all the facts"* before acting[9]. In an unfolding emergency, that leads to paralysis. As one veteran put it, crises don't come with a pause button or a tidy decision tree; more often it's *"make a call now, based on partial information, while ten people argue, your inbox melts, and someone's already drafted a press release…just in case."*[10]

Psychologically, this is completely understandable. **Crises are emotional rollercoasters.** People get scared, overwhelmed, even *stunned* into inaction. At an emergency EU meeting on the very day the war in Ukraine began, Estonia's Prime Minister observed that some officials were so *"genuinely shocked…they couldn't utter a word."*[11] They sat in literal speechless disbelief as events escalated. We expect our leaders to be as unflappable as a TED Talk speaker on triple espresso, but in reality they're humans with a pit in their stomach[12][6]. Even Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger – famous for his cool saving of an airliner – described the moments before his emergency landing as *"the worst, sickening, pit-of-your-stomach, falling-through-the-floor feeling"* of his life[12].

The **fight-or-flight (or freeze)** instinct is an evolutionary response to threat, and it doesn't vanish just because someone carries a CEO or General title. In fact, research in high-pressure fields (from emergency medicine to firefighting) confirms that **no one is immune – high stress *reduces* performance across the board[13].** Our brains and bodies go into a threat state: heart rate and cortisol spike, we get tunnel vision and "auditory exclusion," fine motor skills deteriorate, and working memory plummets[14]. Often, **freeze or indecision is the most common reaction** in acute stress[15]. For example, in medical emergencies even veteran clinicians can

momentarily lock up, not because they lack knowledge, but because their cognitive bandwidth is overwhelmed by the situation[15]. In group settings, there's also the **bystander effect** – each person hesitates, hoping someone else will take charge or fearing overstepping. This is why clear roles and pre-designated responsibilities are so critical (more on that soon).

The bottom line is that **crisis management is a deeply human endeavor, with all the frailties and emotions that implies.** As Luke Blake quipped, *"policy documents [can be] thicker than a Sunday roast,"* but when the real storm hits, your team might be sleep-deprived and emotional, *"pretending everything's fine while quietly panicking."* [2][16] Acknowledging this human factor isn't a weakness – it's the first step to addressing it. It means building plans that account for stress reactions, and fostering a culture where people can admit "This is hard" without stigma[17][18]. In a crisis you *want* your team to speak up if they're overwhelmed or if something's not working; psychological safety and honest communication become lifelines[18].

Shock to Action: How to Avoid "Crisis Paralysis"

If humans are prone to shock, panic, or indecision in a crisis, how do we bridge the gap between **knowing** what to do and actually **doing it** at crunch time? One answer is to ensure that, when needed, someone can **"flip the switch"** – mentally and organizationally – to enter crisis mode without hesitation[19]. In fighter jets like the Swedish Saab Gripen, there is literally a "peace/war" switch that unlocks combat capabilities at the cost of straining the system[20]. The metaphor applies to companies: you need a way to snap from business-as-usual into emergency mode, even if it means suspending some normal routines. That requires two things: **clear authority and criteria on when to activate crisis plans, and a bias for action once the trigger is pulled.**

1. Define Who Decides, and Empower Them: In an emergency at sea, the crew doesn't debate who's in charge – the *skipper* or an appointed officer takes command. Likewise, in organizations, ambiguity over who can declare a crisis often causes dangerous delays. A study of corporate crises found that *"more than four in 10 firms had no plan in place in case of a crisis,"* and even among those that did, many lacked clarity on roles[21]. The result: precious hours lost in confusion. It may sound strict, but as one sailing safety report put it, *"this may sound militaristic, but in a crisis, the most capable person needs to be making the calls."*[22] That means

establishing a clear chain of command *before* anything happens. Who has the authority to declare a crisis and activate the response team? Is it the CEO, the head of Communications, a Crisis Manager on call, or a small committee? Decide that now, and make sure everyone knows it. When an incident hits, **command must reside in one person at a time**, and it's their job to clearly direct the process[22]. Equally important is having pre-defined criteria or trigger points: for example, "If system outage exceeds 30 minutes" or "if multiple media outlets inquire about X issue, we move to crisis mode." This removes some subjectivity and the reluctance to be the one sounding the alarm.

It's worth explicitly **empowering people to call a crisis early**. Often, mid-level staff spot trouble but delay elevating it, unsure if it "qualifies" as a crisis. A healthy crisis-ready culture encourages an attitude of *"if in doubt, escalate."* It's far better to call a drill or minor incident a crisis and later stand down, than to play catch-up when things have spiraled. Remember that statistic: **58% of companies had days or even months of warning signs before a crisis, yet still averaged 21 hours to react**[23][4]. The hesitation to **pull the fire alarm** is pervasive. Leaders should reinforce that there will be no penalty for raising a false alarm in good faith. The mantra should be: *see something truly concerning, say something – fast.* In crisis management circles, you'll often hear "**if it's a maybe, it's a yes**" – meaning if you're on the fence about whether to activate the crisis team, just do it. You can always scale back if it turns out to be nothing. What you can't do is recover lost time from waiting too long. As crisis communications expert Talan Tyminski notes, companies that communicate swiftly – even before all facts are in – **reap the reputational benefits of appearing transparent and responsive**, whereas those who delay are perceived as hiding or inept[24].

2. Speed Over Elegance: Once the crisis mode is triggered, the first priority is **to act – even if your information is imperfect.** One major pitfall is *analysis paralysis*, which one witty report defines as *"a three-hour meeting to agree on absolutely nothing."*[25] In a chaotic situation, aiming for a perfect answer is a fool's errand. As military planners say, "the enemy gets a vote" – the situation will evolve, so your plan will too. It's more important to get an initial **"first line"** or holding statement out, and to take initial containment actions, than to craft the ideal response. Many organizations trip up here by insisting on C-suite approval for every message or waiting until the CEO lands from an international flight (a scenario actually cited in a crisis post-mortem: *waiting for a leader who was mid-air en route to Tenerife*[26]).

Such bottlenecks can be fatal to timely response. Instead, **delegate pre-approval** for certain actions and communications in a crisis. Your crisis team should have some autonomy to act within clear boundaries, as long as they report up promptly. This is why a **"war room"** setup (physical or virtual) is useful – it gathers key people in one place (or call) with authority to make rapid decisions together, rather than slow back-and-forth email chains.

Crucially, don't let the beautifully detailed flowchart or 100-page crisis manual slow you down. As one veteran joked, a flowchart that *"looked great in a workshop"* might have *"all the practical use of a chocolate teapot"* in a real incident[27]. In other words, be ready to be flexible. Use the plan as a guide, but **don't become a slave to procedure when reality throws curveballs**. Your team's judgment and adaptability in the moment matter more than ticking every box on a checklist.

Finally, **communicate, communicate, communicate** – both internally and externally. Internally, over-communicate to your teams so nobody is left in the dark (one common failure is leaders being so busy they forget to update their broader staff, leading to rumors). Externally, even if you don't know much yet, say *something* to acknowledge the issue within the first hour if possible. For instance, a simple holding line: "We are aware of X situation and our teams are responding. We will provide more information as soon as we have it." This buys you time and builds trust. In crisis communications, *silence is rarely golden*. It's human nature to want to wait until you have answers – but by then, narratives may have formed without you. **Only 15% of companies managed to get a response out within one hour** in a study, yet that speed can make the difference in controlling the story[4]. Every second counts in the age of Twitter and TikTok. So once the switch is flipped, *lean forward* and don't look back.

Training for Chaos: Building "Crisis Muscle Memory"

How do we ensure that when the fateful moment comes, our people actually execute all these good intentions? The same way pilots, soldiers, and sailors do: **practice, practice, practice.** There's a saying attributed (perhaps falsely) to the Greek poet Archilochus but beloved in military circles: *"We don't rise to the level of our expectations, we fall to the level of our training."* In high-pressure moments, **you will default to your habits and drills** – or as modern data confirms, *"we fall to the level of our training; no one is immune"*[13]. This is why **pilots run simulator drills**, why **sailors rehearse man-overboard recoveries**, and why **firefighters practice live**

burns. They're trying to overwrite the natural freeze-or-panic response with conditioned actions. As the Crisis Sprint explainer on my website puts it: *"Manuals are useful, but only drills can turn knowledge into reflex."*[28] You want your crisis team's **initial response to be as automatic as a muscle reflex**, borne of familiarity and repetition.

What does this look like in an organizational context? It means going beyond tabletop discussions and actually **simulating crises in real or realistic scenarios**. Bring your crisis team (and extended stakeholders like department heads, comms leads, etc.) together and run a scenario: a major data breach, a viral video scandal, a supply chain failure – whatever keeps you up at night. Then *role-play it*: feed them the partial, evolving information hour by hour and let them make decisions, craft statements, coordinate under a bit of time pressure. This kind of **scenario-based exercise "forces teams to make decisions under pressure, with imperfect data."** [29] It's far more valuable than just reading the plan, because it surfaces how people actually behave and interact when stressed. Maybe in the drill they discover two leaders fight for control, or nobody knows who should approve the press release, or the tech system for emergency communication fails. These *"stress tests"* reveal both individual and systemic gaps that you can then address *before* a real crisis.

Importantly, such drills also help individuals build confidence. Psychologists talk about **stress inoculation** – exposing yourself to manageable levels of stress to build tolerance. The first time your team faces a fast-moving crisis (even a fake one), they may feel overwhelmed. But the *second* or third time, they'll remember, *"Okay, I've been in a war-room simulation like this before. I know not to freak out at the initial chaos. I know our process and my role."* They learn to ride the adrenaline wave rather than be drowned by it. **Training can literally expand the "optimal performance zone"** of your team under stress[30]. Instead of red-lining into panic, their heart rates and focus can stay in a controlled band for longer, because the situation feels at least somewhat familiar. As one emergency medicine podcast noted, viewing a crisis as a **challenge rather than pure threat** improves performance – and training helps shift that mindset[15]. Practice breeds a sense of *"I can handle this,"* which is gold when real trouble hits.

Let's look at a dramatic example: Captain Sullenberger landing Flight 1549 on the Hudson River. When both engines failed, he had seconds to act. Later, he famously said: *"For 42 years, I've been making small, regular deposits in this bank of*

experience, education and training. And on January 15, the balance was sufficient to make a very large withdrawal."[31] In other words, all his decades of drills, simulations, and learned lessons kicked in. He didn't rise to the occasion by magic – he fell back on **reflexes honed over countless hours**. Now, we don't all have 42 years to drill our crisis teams, but the principle holds: every practice scenario is a deposit in your team's collective experience bank.

Another key aspect is **team** muscle memory. It's not just each individual performing under pressure, but how they work together. By drilling as a group, you develop **trust and coordination**. People learn how others react, how to communicate succinctly in chaos, and how to cover for each other's blind spots. A crisis "war room" exercise can even be *fun* in a way – teams often report that going through a simulated disaster together, while stressful, also builds camaraderie (there are usually a few laughs at mistakes made, too)[32]. When the real thing happens, that prior shared experience means folks aren't fumbling through introductions while the building is metaphorically burning. They've seen *who* steps up naturally as a leader, who stays calm, who gets creative – and they can channel those strengths. Indeed, one of the **most important outcomes of crisis training is a *"shared muscle memory as a team."*** [33] It's the collective intuition that *"we've got this – we've been here (in simulation) before."*

To be effective, drills should be realistic and even a bit uncomfortable. They should pressure-test the **"first 0–6 hours"** in particular, because those are the most chaotic and critical[34]. Focus on the moment of flipping into crisis mode and the scramble to get the first communications out and the situation under control. For example, run a drill where multiple things go wrong at once (forcing triage of priorities), or where media are calling incessantly, or social media is erupting with rumors. This helps train the ability to **multi-task and maintain clarity amid noise**. It also highlights why **simplified procedures** are needed – under stress, nobody can handle a 50-step protocol. Through drills, you might decide to streamline your crisis checklists to a one-page cheat sheet for instance.

Don't neglect the **"soft" skills in training either**: practice briefings to leadership (can your team distill the chaos into a 2-minute update for the CEO?), practice media Q&As under pressure, and practice decision-making with incomplete info. These can all be woven into a single simulation or done as focused exercises. The more realistic the rehearsal, the more it builds true muscle memory. It's much like in sports: you want to scrimmage under game-like conditions, not just read the

rulebook. As one leadership professor noted, firefighters in the field don't recite textbook theories; they *"draw on past experiences to guide their decision-making."* [35] If your team's only "experience" of a crisis is a dusty binder, you're in trouble. But if they've lived a few in drills, they can draw on those experiences when a real fire breaks out.

One caution: make sure to **debrief** after drills and integrate the lessons. A simulation isn't worth much if everyone just breathes a sigh of relief and goes back to work without adjusting anything. Identify what **worked well** and should become a new best practice, and what **went wrong** and needs fixing (either via retraining, or changing a process, or acquiring a tool, etc.). Encourage honesty in these debriefs – if someone felt confused about their role, or if communications lagged, now's the time to surface it. In fact, running drills and *not* learning from them can instill false confidence, which is dangerous. Training experts point out the risk of **"Bad Outcome, Good Luck"** reinforcement – you might succeed in a drill or real event by pure luck despite poor decisions, and then not correct the underlying issue[36]. So scrutinize your drills rigorously. The goal is **continuous improvement**, embedding each hard-earned insight into your revised crisis playbook. Over time, your team and plan become sharper and more battle-tested.

Leadership, Culture, and the Human Spirit

Even with roles defined and drills in place, crisis readiness ultimately comes down to human leadership and culture. **Leadership in a crisis is about direction, not perfection**[37]. Leaders must set a clear intent ("Here's our goal, here's our priority right now") and then trust their team to carry it out, adapting as needed. This means resisting the urge to micromanage every tweet or every decision – there simply won't be time. Leaders should communicate plainly and confidently, even if the message is "we don't have all the answers yet." One trap is speaking in such vague corporate-speak that *"your team assumes the building is on fire"* when maybe it's not[9]. Candor and clarity are crucial; they keep everyone grounded.

A word on **emotions and morale:** Crises will put your leadership and your organization's culture to the test. People may get scared or discouraged, especially if the crisis drags on. Good leaders acknowledge the emotional toll rather than dismiss it. As one crisis article reminded, if someone tears up in a debrief, that's not a *failure* of resilience – it's a human being being human[17]. Building a resilient

organization doesn't mean making everyone emotionless; it means creating an environment where concerns can be voiced and support is available. Encourage your team to take breaks (yes, even in a crisis) and watch each other for burnout signs. Fatigue is the silent saboteur in long-running crises[38] – decision-making quality will drop if people are fried. Rotate staff if possible, and empower deputies so that no single person (including yourself) becomes a bottleneck or single point of failure due to exhaustion. *"A tired Gold Commander is a risky Gold Commander,"* as the saying goes[39]. Sustained crisis response is a marathon, not a sprint, so pace and care for your people accordingly.

Culture-wise, the organizations that navigate crises best often have a few things in common: high trust, high accountability, and a bias for action. High trust means people are willing to speak up with bad news early (no shooting the messenger) and leaders delegate decisions without fearing loss of control. High accountability means everyone takes ownership of their part – no finger-pointing or waiting for someone else to solve it. And a bias for action, as discussed, means the team would rather do something and adapt than do nothing and fall behind. These traits can be nurtured through regular team exercises and by leadership example day-to-day. If you foster these qualities in "peacetime," they will pay dividends in "wartime."

Finally, let's address technology briefly – including AI. There's amazing technology now for early warning, crisis analytics, even AI that drafts incident reports. Use these tools, but don't become **over-reliant on them at the expense of human judgment**. As one crisis tech expert noted, *"AI should assist decision-making, not replace it… final decisions should remain with experienced professionals who can factor in context and nuance."*[40][41] In a crisis, the data might be incomplete or the situation novel – an algorithm won't automatically know what your values are or what stakeholder sensitivities exist. AI can help **detect** problems and suggest options, but **human operators must make the critical calls**. Don't let shiny tech give a false sense of security; it's the trained humans at the helm that ultimately steer the organization through the storm.

Conclusion: People First, Plans Second

Crisis readiness is often thought of in terms of systems, checklists, and protocols – all important elements. But as we've explored, it truly starts in the minds and hearts of the people who execute those protocols. When a crisis hits, **it's the human**

response that will make or break the outcome. Will your team choke on indecision, or will they rally and respond with agility? The answer depends on how much you've invested in their preparation and empowerment.

To recap the key takeaways for improving human-centric crisis readiness:

- **Clarify the "Trigger" and Chain of Command:** Decide who has the authority to declare a crisis and activate the plan. Make sure everyone knows **who flips the switch** to crisis mode and when. Remove ambiguity and encourage early escalation of issues[22].
- **Speed Matters – Don't Wait for All the Facts:** In a crisis, **a good-enough plan executed now beats a perfect plan next week**. Avoid analysis paralysis and overly hierarchical approvals. Empower your team to act swiftly within guidelines[25][27]. Every minute saved in reacting can prevent a PR disaster or contain damage.
- **Practice, Then Practice Some More:** Conduct regular crisis simulations and drills to build that **muscle memory**. Rehearse different scenarios so your team learns to handle pressure, uncertainty, and coordination in real time. As the saying goes, you will **fall to the level of your training** when under duress[13] – so train to a high level.
- **Learn and Adapt:** After every exercise or real incident, **debrief honestly**. Identify what went well and what didn't. Update your crisis playbook and training based on those lessons. Over time, these iterations will significantly sharpen your readiness.
- **Foster a Resilient Culture:** Encourage open communication and trust within your crisis team and beyond. People should feel safe admitting issues or fatigue. Distribute leadership to avoid overload. In short, build a culture that **puts people at the center of your crisis plans, not just in an appendix**[42]. A supported, cohesive team will outperform a siloed, fearful one every time.
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In an era of fast-moving crises – whether from social media firestorms, cyberattacks, or even literal warfare – the organizations that prevail will be those that can **flip into crisis mode without hesitation**, guided by prepared people who know their roles and trust their training. As I witnessed in Ukraine, humans are capable of remarkable resilience and adaptation when circumstances demand it. We can proactively cultivate that readiness. So dust off those crisis manuals and bring them to life with human drills and decision-making. Your next crisis – whatever form it takes – will be the ultimate test, and it will be *won or lost in those first few hours*[43]. Make sure your people are ready to hit the ground running when the alarm bells ring.

Lastly, a bit of hard-earned wisdom: crises are intense, but they can also galvanize people in positive ways. Teams often discover creativity, courage, and camaraderie under pressure

that they never knew they had. With preparation and the right mindset, a crisis can bring out your organization's finest qualities rather than its faults. As Voltaire aptly said, *"Life is a shipwreck, but we must not forget to sing in the lifeboats."* We prepare so that even when the waves are crashing, **we remember to lead, to care for our crew, and maybe even to keep a sense of humor amid the storm**.

Crisis readiness is not about being superhuman; it's about being **sustainably human** – trained, practiced, and resolute when it counts[42]. Put your people first in readiness, and they will take care of the rest.

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