Critical Incident Response Services (CIRS)

Confident in Crisis. Resilient in Recovery.

Crisis Leadership

Prepare. Respond. Recover.

Prepare: Know Your Crisis Mode of Operation (MO)

Everyone brings different strengths and vulnerabilities to a crisis. Feeling overwhelmed during an emergency is a normal human response. Leadership expertise in one environment does not always translate into effective crisis leadership, just as an excellent physician may not be the best fit for an emergency department.

During a crisis, natural survival responses can increase heart rate, narrow focus, cloud judgment, and trigger automatic fight, flight, or freeze reactions. While these responses are designed to protect us, they can interfere with effective leadership when clear thinking and decisive action are needed.

Ineffective Crisis Leadership	More Effective Crisis Leadership
Fight: Blames others, over-controls situations, silences dissent or makes rash decisions.	Remains decisive without becoming aggressive. Focuses on known facts and faces challenges.
Flight: Avoids difficult conversations, delays decisions, withdraws, or hopes the problem resolves itself.	Remains present, communicates frequently, and makes timely decisions, even when information is incomplete.
Freeze: Overanalyzes, gathers excessive data, delays action, or becomes silent or inactive.	Pauses briefly to assess the situation, identifies priorities, and initiates appropriate response protocols.

Effective crisis leadership begins before an emergency occurs. Leaders should understand their own crisis MO, as well as the tendencies of their leadership team. Understanding these patterns helps organizations assign critical crisis roles to those best equipped to perform under pressure.

Leaders can strengthen crisis readiness by:

1. Consulting trusted and experienced emergency response professionals.
2. Establishing both primary and backup response teams and equipping them with a practical emergency response plan.
3. Conducting tabletop exercises and reasonable rehearsals to build familiarity and confidence.

Crisis Leadership Takeaway

We cannot eliminate our natural stress reactions, but we can prepare for them. By understanding our automatic reactions and practicing effective response strategies, we can improve how we lead during unexpected and overwhelming events.

Leaders who invest in preparedness, develop capable crisis response teams, and rehearse before emergencies occur are better positioned to act calmly, decisively, and effectively when critical incidents arise.

Thank you for reading. All Crisis Leadership briefs and infographics are available for download HERE. These resources are designed to help leaders prepare with confidence, respond effectively, and recover with resilience.