The Psychology Behind Effective Crisis Leadership

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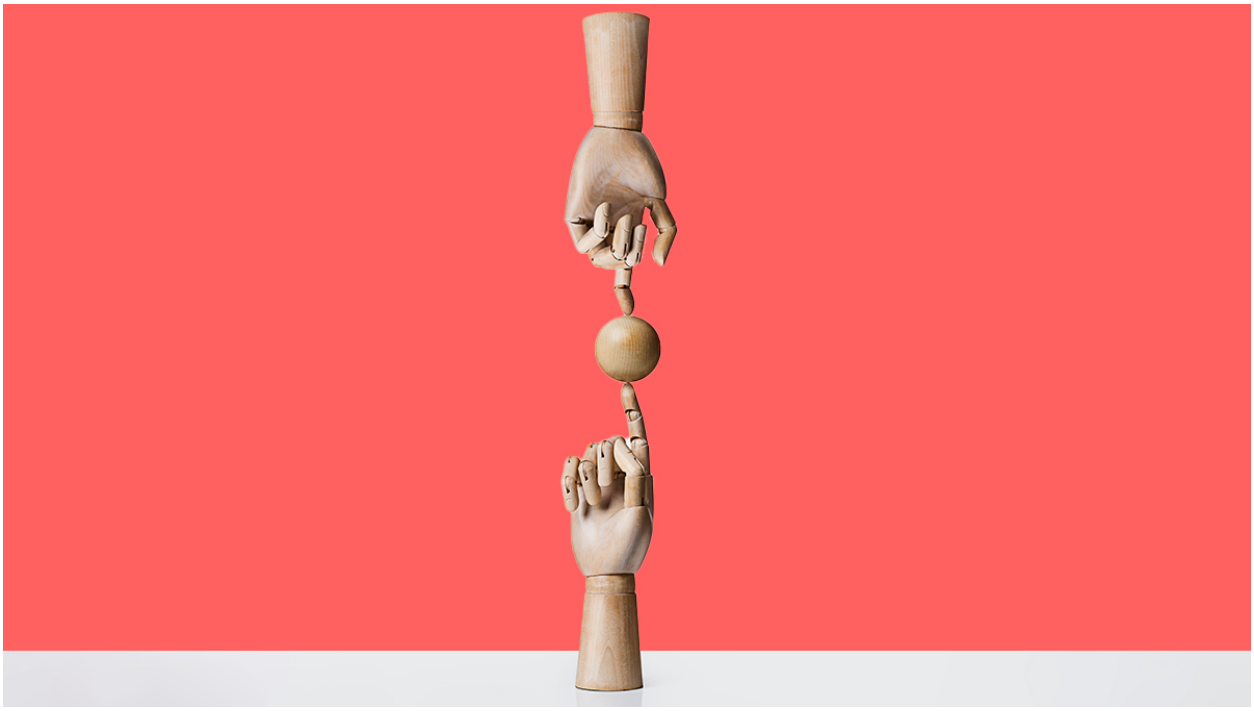
April 22, 2020

Harvard Business Review

https://hbr.org/2020/04/the-psychology-behind-effective-crisis-leadership



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It is often said that a strong vision makes a good leader. But in a crisis, people don't need a vision to inspire them–they're already raring to act. Instead, they need what psychologists call "holding".

When I ask groups of managers what makes a good leader, I seldom have to wait long before someone says, "Vision!" and everyone nods. I have asked that question countless

times for the past 20 years, to cohorts of senior executives, middle managers, and young students from many different sectors, industries, backgrounds, and countries. The answer is always the same: A vision inspires and moves people. Expansion, domination, freedom, equality, salvation — whatever it is, if a leader's vision gives us direction and hope, we will follow. If you don't have one, you can't call yourself a leader.

This enchantment with vision, I believe, is the manifestation of a bigger problem: a disembodied conception of leadership. Visions hold our imagination captive, but they rarely have a positive effect on our bodies. In fact, we often end up sacrificing our bodies in the pursuit of different kinds of visions, and celebrating that fact — whether it is by dying for our countries or working ourselves to exhaustion for our companies. Visions work the same way whether mystics or leaders have them: They promise a future and demand our life. In some cases, that sacrifice is worth it. In others, it is not. Just as it can ignite us, a vision can burn us out.

When a leader's appeal rests on a vision alone, leadership is not whole. And the limitations of such visionary leadership become painfully obvious in times of crisis, uncertainty, or radical change. Take the coronavirus pandemic. No one had anything like it in their "Vision 2020." Crises always test visions, and most don't survive. Because when there's a fire in a factory, a sudden drop in revenues, a natural disaster, we don't need a call to action. We are already motivated to move, but we often flail. What we need is a type of holding, so that we can move purposefully.

What do I mean by holding? In psychology, the term has a specific meaning. It describes the way another person, often an authority figure, *contains* and *interprets* what's happening in times of uncertainty. Containing refers to the ability to soothe distress and interpreting to the ability to help others make sense of a confusing predicament. Think of a CEO who, in a severe downturn, reassures employees that the company has the resources to weather the storm and most jobs will be protected, helps them interpret revenue data, and gives clear directions about what must be done to service existing clients and develop new business. That executive is holding: They think clearly, offer reassurance, orient people and help them stick together. That work is as important as inspiring others. In fact, it is a precondition for doing so.

Holding is a more obscure and seldom celebrated facet of leadership than vision, but no less important. And when crises hit, it becomes essential. In groups whose leaders can hold, mutual support abounds, work continues, and a new vision eventually emerges. When leaders cannot hold, and we can't hold each other, anxiety, anger, and fragmentation ensue. In a study of BP during the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, for example, my INSEAD colleague (and wife!) Jennifer Petriglieri observed both outcomes. She found that BP's top talent, which the company needed to resolve and recover from the crisis, had different reactions to the crisis. Some lost faith in the company and in its leaders. Others doubled their effort and commitment. The difference between the two groups? The former was exposed to the top brass' upbeat messages. The latter had bosses who drafted them to help clean up the mess. Despite the stress, working closely with one's boss and colleagues on the response was more containing and informative. It

reassured those who did it about the company's integrity and long-term viability. Being held as we work through a crisis, the study concluded, is more useful than being told how bright the future is.

It was Donald Winnicott, a pioneering British psychoanalyst, who first conceptualized holding in this way. He observed that being held well was necessary for healthy growth in children. Parents who were available but not demanding, reassuring but not intrusive, responsive but not reactive, present even if not perfect, Winnicott observed, provided a "holding environment" that made children comfortable and curious. Holding made space for them to learn how to make sense of, and manage, their inner and social worlds—and to develop a robust sense of self. That is, a self with a healthy regard for its abilities and limitations, a self that can learn, play, work, face hardships, and sustain hope through it all.

Caretakers who held well, Winnicott noted, did not shelter children from distress and turns of fate. But they buffered children enough that they could process distress, and helped them find words to name their experiences, and ways to manage it. "Are you angry, love? Is that why you kicked? Come here. How about we tell your brother to leave your bear alone, instead."

Children who are held well, Winnicott discovered, became more sociable and independent as grown-ups. They neither became paralyzed when faced with challenges, nor sought rescue from parental figures. They did seek help when needed and made good use of it. Winnicott called such selves *true*, meaning that they were free to make their way in the world, and he saw such strength and freedom as the result, one might say, of a competent kind of love. He also observed that they could offer it in turn. They had learned to hold themselves and others too.

Good holding, in short, not only makes us more comfortable and courageous. It makes *us*. That was Winnicott's major insight, one as revolutionary now as it was then. His work refined Freud's idea that socialization tames us and can make us neurotic. That only happens, Winnicott observed, when authorities impose a vision of who we must be that leaves us little room to discover who we can become. Neurosis, he contended, is not the product of what socialization does to our instincts, but of what it fails to do with our potential. Mental health and freedom, then, take learning new ways of relating to each other.

Children are not the only ones who need holding to survive and grow. Adults do too, throughout their lives. To face difficult circumstances, master new conditions, and develop in the process, we need holding from leaders and organizations. And we need to hold each other.

When we expand the definition of holding beyond child development, however, it becomes clear that there are different kinds of holding. In his later works, Winnicott hinted that the immediate, intimate holding that he spent most of his work describing

works best when it occurs in a broader context of a society that is itself secure and free enough to render interpersonal holding less necessary. That was one of the functions of a democratic society, Winnicott argued: making it less indispensable for members to rely on their next of kin.

In my own research I have drawn a distinction between interpersonal holding and this broader institutional holding. Ideally, good leaders provide both, in a crisis and beyond. This is how.

Leaders provide institutional holding by strengthening the structure and culture of an organization or group. They do it, for example, when they put in place policies and procedures that reassure people about their job security or how fairly the organization is treating them. They do it when they promote dialogue that lets diverse people participate in decisions and in adapting to new challenges together, rather than encouraging polarized factions. For leaders in executive positions, this is the most impactful way of holding people in a crisis. Failing to provide it makes expressions of sympathy and understanding ring hollow. Providing institutional holding, conversely, will often make people forgive even personally dislikable leaders their remoteness.

To provide institutional holding, tell your people what will happen to their salaries, health insurance, and working conditions. What will change about how they do their work? What are the key priorities now? Who needs to do what? You might not be able to make predictions, but you can still offer informed interpretations, that is, why certain measures are sensible and needed instead of others. Dispel rumors. Encourage and protect everyone's participation even more than you usually do. Do these things before you recommend the usual regular breaks, meditation, or exercise — otherwise you will just be neglecting your duty of care.

Once you have provided institutional holds, turn your attention to interpersonal holding, offering it to others and modeling it for them. To do this well you must let yourself be in the present. Your impulse may be to focus on the future but that will be little more than escapism if you cannot witness and understand people's immediate experience and concerns. (Even if you can't resolve them!). You need to muster a lingering, attentive availability that lets others "go on being," as Winnicott put it. This is more than just being around and supportive when needed; it is a mixture of permission (to feel whatever it is that we are feeling without being shamed or overwhelmed) and curiosity (to consider different ways to understand our circumstances and, eventually, to imagine our future). Remember, as Winnicott described it, the core of holding is acknowledging distress and difficulty without giving in to powerlessness.

Leaders are not the only sources of holding. There is much we can offer each other, at work and elsewhere. In a study of successful independent workers, Sue Ashford, Amy Wrzesniewski, and I found that they invested heavily in cultivating a holding environment with peers and with behaviors that tempered the financial and emotional volatility of gig work. In her study of working couples, for example, Jennifer Petriglieri found that the most successful held each other reciprocally. Each partner helped the

other face their career struggles and grow professionally, not just at home. When I reviewed the literature on grief, for a piece I wrote with Sally Maitlis on mourning in the workplace, again I found that a holding presence—capable, first, to just bear witness to another person's pain, and later to help them find new meaning—was the most valuable gift a peer (or a manager) could offer. That gift is even more important when the loss is shared. Holding brings us back to life together, then.

People never forget how managers treated them when they were facing loss. And we will remember how our institutions, managers, and peers, held us through this crisis — or failed to. We also see the consequences of past failures of holding, in those institutions struggling to mobilize an already depleted pool of resources. It is tempting to resort to command and control in a crisis, but it is leaders who hold instead that help us work through it. And it is to those leaders, I believe, that we'll turn to when time comes to articulate a vision for the future.

When I ask managers to reflect a bit more on the leaders whose visions they find most compelling and enduring, they usually realize that none of those leaders started from a vision or stopped there. Instead the leader started with a sincere concern for a group of people, and as they held those people and their concerns, a vision emerged. They then held people through the change it took to realize that vision, together. Their vision may be how we remember leaders because it can hold us captive. But it is their hold that truly sets us free.

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