

Emotional Intelligence as a Foundation for Crisis Management

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About a year ago, the functional area of harm reduction shifted drastically in our field, and the former trajectory of many prevention education professionals transformed from solely planning systems and strategies to improve member experiences, to fulfilling the role of crisis manager. Living in what felt like an alternate reality for nearly 6 months with no reprieve, myself and others had to reach deep into our theoretical toolboxes to not only cope, but continue to be a partner for our campus counterparts. Personally, one book stood out to me in a way I had not anticipated: *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman, Richard E Boyatzis, and Annie McKee. Suddenly, this text became my manual for how to survive the current status quo of the fraternal world, and maybe, come out on the winning end.

Goleman et al., writes, “In crisis, all eyes turn to the leader for emotional guidance” in order to “find meaning and sense even in the face of chaos and madness” (*Primal Leadership*, xvi, 2013). The difficult thing is, amidst crisis, it is hard to project resonance and be a person of emotional stability and even empathy; the opposite is often most true. Short-tempered, frustrated, and lacking empathy are many of the ways we instead choose to deal with crisis, reject our current state of reality, and defensively protect our own emotional wellbeing.

This natural response does two things. First, it prevents us from truly connecting with our colleagues during a time when partnership is most needed. Second, it provides the example that in times of crisis, the most effective way to manage oneself (or each other) is through emotionally-stunted, egocentric, and blame-placing behavior. Goleman et al., proposes another way of responding to crisis and postulates the notion of “what would [crisis] look like if organizations ... were naturally places of resonance?” and goes on to ask, “what would schools be like if education also included these emotional intelligence abilities to foster resonance?” (*Primal Leadership*, xvi, 2013).

This thought is striking because it identifies how we as a profession address crisis could in fact change the type of crisis that exists. Meaning, as we continue to address situations involving everything from substance abuse to a spectrum of interpersonal violence, each issue seems to be cyclical and unceasing. This is because the way in which we handle crisis rarely seeks to reform the issue at hand, but instead addresses it in the short term until it subsides. We treat a crisis like a wildfire – pouring gallons of water on the situation at hand to put out the flames – then leave the embers smoldering, waiting to again burst into flame with another spark.

There is a different way to simultaneously address crisis and the critical systemic issues, but it requires a significant amount of intentionality and a higher level of emotional intelligence than what is commonly utilized. In fact, Goleman et al., proposes utilizing emotional intelligence in situations of crisis would yield benefits for members that “would be reflected in a decline of social ills – ranging from violence, to substance abuse ... communities would benefit from higher levels of tolerance, caring, and personal responsibility” (Primal Leadership, xvii, 2013).

With this in mind, the question of how can we “[leave] people feeling uplifted and inspired even in a difficult moment” (Primal Leadership, 20, 2013) remains. A simplistic route to further examine a complex topic is to study the four domains of Emotional Intelligence and its relationship to serving as a resonant leader amidst crisis. The four domains include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

The domain of self-awareness, or being aware of our own emotions, is an essential tool in crisis management because “if we are poor to manage them, we are less able to understand others” (Primal Leadership, 30, 2013). In addition, self-awareness facilitates both “empathy and self-management” which allows for “effective relationship management” (Primal Leadership, 30, 2013). Situations of crisis often prompt a natural response of either fight or flight – both responses which, when working with students and professional partners, do little to support a situation in the short- or long-term. In contrast, working from a place of empathy and managing our own emotions allows us to act and think from the perspective of the individuals experiencing crisis. Thus, we think less punitively and act in a way which achieves the best possible outcome for everyone involved. This leads to the second domain of Emotional Intelligence, self-management.

To be an advocate, many in the crisis management world instinctively air on the side of the victim in any given situation. Emotionally intelligent leaders who excel in the domain of self-management “sense how others see a situation” (Primal Leadership, 30, 2013). This is crucial, especially as a headquarters professional, due to the sheer number of stakeholders involved in any given crisis, and their many vantage points and concerns. Self-management allows an individual charged with managing crisis to not wholly set aside their own feelings and emotional responses, but to have a deeper understanding of what motivates those responses. When tasked with a crisis unexpectedly, it is easy to want to say “*It is not our fault! We are good! Look at the numerous things we have accomplished!*” However, self-management predicates we instead seek to fact find and understand the perspective of others, thereby checking our own biases before curating a response.

Next, the domain of social awareness supports driving resonance. “This attunement ... lets a leader sense the shared values and priorities that can guide the group” (Primal Leadership, 30, 2013). Diving into crisis means interacting with others with whom you may not regularly engage or share a common values system. This dynamic is what often pits a headquarters entity in conflict with its campus partners and vice versa. When working to be a change agent within crisis, social awareness allows a leader to capitalize on the existing values to better manage the situation and provide a path forward for rehabilitative success after the crisis.

The final domain, relationship management, is best achieved when a leader can “understand their own vision and values, perceive the emotions of the group, and thus catalyze resonance” (Primal Leadership, 31, 2013). In short, the fourth domain is a combination of the former three; relationship management is the best way to engage in the actual act of managing crisis. Once you have identified your own emotional response (self-awareness), discovered its motivation (self-management), and identified the shared values and priorities of the group in crisis (social awareness), you can effectively employ the fourth. Relationship management in a crisis is best summarized by how you take your cumulative knowledge about a situation and employ it to create a path forward which meets the needs of all stakeholders. This looks different for each entity: when working with parents in crisis, personal culpability and impact on their child’s future is the greatest concern; for a campus professional it is the risk posed to the fraternity/sorority community at large; and for headquarters professionals it is the local impact on the chapter and their alumni as well as the risk of greater (inter)national impact.

With this information in mind, what is the next best step? Take a moment, pause, and check where you stand within these four domains. This is the best way to keep the fundamental elements of resonant leadership at the forefront of your mind and in our field. Emotional intelligence is critical as we continue to address crisis, not only in terms of the preservation of individual wellbeing by those managing crisis but also to effectively confront the cyclical nature of crisis we continually experience. To act otherwise is to put ourselves in a loop of doing the same thing and expecting different results, making little headway in the world of prevention education which is so sorely needed amongst our members.

References

Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R. E., & McKee, A. (2003). *Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press.