

# Operation Disrupt: How to Lead During a Crisis

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Leadership is easy when nothing changes. However, change is constant and has the potential to be very disruptive to both your people and your business operations. Are you prepared to lead during a crisis? In this latest article, Ian Brenner and Hylton Levy tap into the mind of Lieutenant Colonel Eleanor Taylor as she shares her secrets to leading during uncertainty.

Stationed deep in Kandahar province, Afghanistan, Lieutenant Colonel Eleanor Taylor's objective was clear—remove a village market of explosives (IEDs) planted by insurgents. The location of the explosives was known, but there was also a real danger of the team being attacked during the operation.


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Just hours before the operation, new information emerged that the insurgents were aware of the plan and waiting to strike. This meant Eleanor had to weigh the reliability of the new information, set aside a plan in which her team was heavily invested in, and explain her change of decision to her soldiers and superiors. No easy task.

Recently, I hosted a webinar—*How to Effectively Lead During a Crisis.* Our featured guest was Eleanor Taylor—a decorated Lieutenant Colonel in the Canadian Forces—and she opened with this riveting story.

Eleanor enjoyed a 25 year career as a soldier and leader, but now she consults with business leaders in various industries. During the webinar, she was joined by Larry Baldachin and my colleague, Barry Pokroy.
Using her experience in the military, we examined how business leaders deal with major disruptions while continuing to give direction through the fog of uncertainty.

## Remove the ambiguity that causes paralysis

Crises are characterized by confusion and ambiguity. “People facing ambiguity lose their sense of direction, which can result in paralysis,” Eleanor notes. “However, good leaders can do a lot to remove that ambiguity and bring teams back into action.” Sometimes very little can be done to change the environment. The real management skill comes in defining what is known, accepting the burden of responsibility, delineating the strategy forward, and communicating back to the team.
For larger, more complex organizations like the military, Eleanor praises the benefits of hierarchy. Operating within defined parameters of mission command doesn’t stifle initiative,” she says. “It’s actually the opposite.” Once people understand there’s a plan that’s supported throughout the organization, they are more willing to innovate and take risks when executing.
For Larry, 9/11 introduced uncertainty to the world and his business but it taught him that leaders need to act in times of crisis. “I thought about my business and clients and I recognized that I had no choice but to move forward—I had people whose livelihoods depended on me, so I had to act.” As he points out, ambiguity leads to conservatism, but we can’t stand still. “At least in business, our decisions are not fatal. Sometimes, it’s an opportunity to learn and do better.”

## Be open to the possibility of changing your own mind

The facts, and our knowledge of them, change rapidly during a crisis. Our decisions can and should too. As humans, we too often become invested in our plans, even as the cost-benefit factors are shifting around us. For leaders, the prospect of changing course can be painful. There’s the fear of appearing indecisive or arguing against our own previous rationale. As Eleanor describes it, there’s a dose of humility that comes with good decision-making. How credible is the new information that conflicts with my previous assumptions? How does it alter the probabilities? And how do I communicate all this to others who depend on me, in a way that’s transparent and will earn their buy-in?
As Barry sees it, “80% of decisions are made based on ego.” A good leader needs to get past this and unpack elements of EQ, or Emotional Quotient. “The first thing is to listen,” Barry explains, “in order to make sure you have all available information. However, good leaders also need to maintain the confidence of their people, and that means showing vulnerability.”

## Be prepared to make decisions without all the information

Leaders have no shortage of analytical tools at their fingertips to help model decision-making. Usually what's lacking is reliable inputs—information.  As Eleanor recognizes, "analysis is critical in making the best decisions, but in times of crisis we may have to act before all the facts are known, and that means relying on our gut." Gut isn't just emotion or instinct, though. Effective leaders develop a sense around decision-making that draws on experience, previous research, logic and open discussion with colleagues whose opinions we value.

According to Larry, gut decisions are more important than we think. "You need to ask yourself who you trust? Where is the information coming from? Where have you seen this sort of thing before and what worked—or didn't?" Not all of us have relevant experience or knowledge to draw on, but seasoned leaders generally do.

## Use planning tools to identify optionality

Planning is simply setting a course of action with whatever information we have at the time. It can be a frustrating exercise. As Eisenhower said "plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." We can't foresee all the variables and how they will impact us, but thinking hard about them, causes us to consider what actions we can take *if* something happens, and there is optionality in knowing how to react as the future unfolds. As Larry advises, "you need to recognize which variables you can't change, which you can, and when to do it."

## And finally, learn to filter your emotions

Crises have emotional repercussions for leaders, just like everyone else. Eleanor acknowledges, you can't always reveal your pain to others. "You have to park your emotions and deal with them later. You're dealing with 100 other things in crisis and your own vulnerability is not something you want to put on display."

Barry uses the parenting comparison. "At times, parents need to do the suffering while their kids are doing well—we need to hold both realities." As he explains, "We can filter, but that doesn't mean we minimize or avoid." Eleanor stresses the importance of having a confidant to share your thoughts with, to be honest about how you're feeling. "So, when you turn to face the troops, you tell the truth, but you don't disclose everything inside. A leader can do much for the team in a time crisis, but no one said it wouldn't sometimes get lonely at the top."

Both Barry and Eleanor agreed though, the emotions don't go away. When the crisis is over, make sure you take the time to process them and then we can move past them and learn from them—giving us a better gut-decision for next time.

## Surging Forward

Now, you might be wondering how Eleanor's story ends. I will say, she ended up changing course once she knew her plans were compromised. Although she did have to pivot, there are still valuable lessons in this story. When confronted with a crisis, she reduced ambiguity, put her ego and emotions aside and made the best decision with the information available at the time. Executives take note.

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