# Leading a campus through crisis: The role of college and university presidents

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## Abstract

*Presidents, chancellors and other top leaders of higher education institutions have an important role to play in providing normative leadership to guide their institutions through — and back from — a period of crisis. Crisis leadership is an important function, one that is distinct from crisis operational management, and one that deserves greater attention. Crisis leadership comprises six distinct but related tasks: preparing, sense-making, decision-making, meaning-making, terminating and learning. This paper illustrates each of these six tasks with examples from well-known university crises in the USA. The paper concludes with suggestions regarding good practices for improving preparedness and crisis leadership.*

## Keywords

*crisis, crisis leadership, issues management, higher education presidents, higher education leadership, higher education administration, higher education public relations*

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## INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education (IHEs) face many kinds of significant disruptions. These incidents can stem from natural causes (fires, floods, storms, pandemic illnesses), infrastructure failures (structural collapses, accidental IT breakdowns) or human actions (violence and other criminal behaviour, malfeasance, protests, deliberate cyber-attacks). What all these have in common is that they are potential 'crises'. As crisis leadership expert Paul 't Hart (drawing on his previous work with Rosenthal and Charles)[1] has suggested:

> A crisis can be said to occur when policymakers experience a serious **threat** to the basic structures or the fundamental **values** and norms of a system, which under **time pressure** and highly **uncertain circumstances** necessitates making vital decisions.[2]

All of the contingencies mentioned above tend to share these features. It should be noted, however, that the challenge leaders face does not end with the need to make decisions. As we will see, crisis leadership requires not only making decisions, but also communicating them in ways that help to maintain a leader's (and an organisation's) legitimacy and credibility. Furthermore, it is important to note that crises often come with opportunities as well as threats. They are occasions that can be used to demonstrate effective leadership and dramatise the need for change.[3]

Colleges and universities seem especially vulnerable to crises. Indeed, higher education institutions sometimes seem to almost purposefully have been designed to produce crises. Campuses are built to be open, both physically and intellectually, and while this allows varying ideas and people to come into contact, it also poses the risk of easy access for criminals. In the USA and many other nations, university campuses are places where the major issues of the day are debated openly and passionately, sometimes leading to tense encounters between people with opposing viewpoints, confrontations that occasionally flare up into violent conflicts, such as what occurred at the University of California — Berkeley in February 2017, when demonstrators lit fires and threw rocks to protest a speech by Breitbart News editor Milo Yiannopoulos, prompting the university to cancel his appearance over safety concerns — a cancellation that drew public condemnation from US President Donald Trump, who threatened Berkeley's federal funding.[4] This incident is a reminder of just how often campus crises include elements that require not only operational management (putting out the literal fires and coping with other forms of physical/material threats), but also management of reputation (putting out the metaphoric fires).

Not only do the physical design, organisational structure and value systems of IHEs make them prone to crises, these factors also make effective crisis management and leadership that much more difficult. Academic culture generally is at odds with effective crisis management. The principles that universities value so highly — such as taking the time to study a problem thoroughly, involving large numbers of stakeholders in key decisions and devolving authority to the lowest possible level — run contrary to what is required to respond to a critical incident, where decisions must be made rapidly, information is spotty or inaccurate and there is not time to shape consensus in the usual way.

Over the last decade or so, there has been a growing attention to crisis readiness in higher education. Especially since

the mass shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007, campus officials have been working diligently to assure that plans are in place, that first responders have necessary skills and equipment, that there is a cadre of personnel trained to manage critical incidents and that the institution has a system for rapidly notifying students and faculty of emergencies, something that is mandated by federal law in the United States.

Laudable and important as these efforts are, they often miss a key element: the preparation of presidents and other top policy-level officers of the university to perform their roles in a crisis. We argue that *crisis leadership* is an important function, one that is distinct from *crisis operational management*, and one that deserves greater attention.

When crisis leadership is ineffective, institutions can suffer bigger losses and greater damage to reputations, and require more time to return to normal operations. In addition, top IHE leaders face significant personal risks — including the risk of being sacked. A recent study conducted by researchers at Southern Methodist University and reported on in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* found that involuntary presidential departures increased dramatically between 2008 and 2013. While the majority were due to questions about spending, crises that led to widespread campus dissatisfaction — such as controversies related to athletics or politics — were also frequent causes of why presidents lost their jobs. In several of these instances, it appears that good crisis leadership skills could have made the difference between continuing to lead and being forced to look for a new job.[5]

Given the crucial role of leadership in crisis management, it is not surprising that a growing multidisciplinary community of scholars from fields such as public administration and political science, management, organisational psychology, sociology and mass communications has sought to better understand the essential elements of crisis leadership in a variety of public, private, and non-profit contexts and across a large number of cases. A substantial body of this research is reviewed by Boin et al.[6] as well as by Stern.[7] These authors propose unpacking crisis leadership into six core leadership tasks, which will be described below.

## WHAT IS THE LEADER'S ROLE IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT?

The role of strategic leaders in crisis is often obscured by an over-emphasis on the operational and technocratic dimensions of crisis management. This focus may stem in part from the significant incentives for universities, governments and other organisations, especially in the United States, to adopt the terminology and methods associated with the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and its related operational structure, the Incident Command System (ICS).[8]

While these operationally focused structures and practices are often helpful in strengthening crisis response processes within and across organisations, they tend to under-specify and at times neglect the crucial normative leadership roles of leaders, including university presidents, provosts and — under some circumstances — trustees. NIMS, while potentially helpful, is at best a platform and point of departure. Furthermore, it has not been implemented consistently nor does it enjoy the full support of the practitioner community, issues that Jensen and Sevison point out in their extensive reviews of the research

literature and stock of practical experience pertaining to NIMS.[9]

Similarly, Renaud has criticised NIMS for, among other things, failing to recognise the importance of normative leadership, especially in the initial response phase.

> While NIMS currently teaches organizational structure, it is silent regarding how an incident commander comes to determine what that structure should be trying to achieve and the direction in which it should be moving. Some work with sensemaking as a strategy for determining mission, path, and direction for the ICS structure created to handle subsequent phases of the event would be invaluable. In fact, it is everything. A well-functioning team is useless if they have misidentified the problem and are, therefore, following the wrong path.[10]

Crisis leadership in IHEs is exacerbated by the fact that many academic leaders are unfamiliar, or uncomfortable with, their crisis responsibilities and succumb to the temptation to delegate them to professional first responders or other subordinate figures in the university hierarchy. Those subordinates, in turn, often reinforce this behaviour by assuming that all will be well if only the civilian leaders allow the folks in uniform to take charge and do their jobs without interference. Both of these orientations tend to neglect the following complications, however:

- Many forms of crisis involve reputational threats as opposed to physical or material threats, and reputation management is often beyond the expertise of the first responder organisations who tend to set the tone with regard to university preparedness at many institutions.
- Crises are more complex than the normal emergencies that first responder organisations are generally staffed, structured and trained to handle. Crises present unexpected and often highly complex and dynamic elements, involve multiple stakeholders (who can have widely varying expectations), are highly visible, and are marked by interdependencies and often unanticipated cascading effects. Crises — as opposed to emergencies — typically require a holistic, strategic, adaptive and highly 'political' approach.
- It is very common for crises to demonstrate poor fit with existing rules, policies and procedures. People lower in the organisational hierarchy often lack the authority to modify those rules, limiting their ability to manage a crisis strategically and effectively.
- Crises often require accessing extraordinary financial, material or intellectual resources — resources that only top leaders are able to mobilise.

These complications suggest that effective and legitimate crisis response tends to require *normative leadership* of top civilian leaders. Such leadership can provide overall strategic direction for the important operational efforts, clarify and highlight key values and priorities, authorise and enable necessary departures from everyday rules and practices, and ensure that sufficient human, financial and material resources are allocated and mobilised. These functions *are essential* and may be sorely missed by operational leaders, who are forced to operate under normative uncertainty and often at great professional risk when such normative leadership is lacking. In addition, as discussed below, the literature suggests that there are a number of *core*

*leadership tasks* associated with successful crisis management.

## CORE LEADERSHIP TASKS AND ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE WORLD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Several decades of intensive empirical research on crisis management supports the finding that leaders in a broad variety of domestic and international contexts face recurring challenges when confronted with crises. These are *preparing, sense-making, decision-making, meaning-making, terminating,* and *learning.*[11,12] These tasks are relevant to a wide variety of public sector contexts – including universities – and are central not only to effective crisis leadership in a particular incident, but also to creating better pre-conditions for future incidents and resilient adaptation to changing institutional environments over the longer term.

*Preparing* refers to the task of creating pre-conditions and dispositions which facilitate collaborative effort as well as effective and legitimate intervention when crises occur.[13,14] Elements of preparing include activities such as organising, planning, training and exercising. This work generally entails attempting to identify key players and roles likely to be required for effective response (and recovery) and making sure that each role-player is capable of enacting that role skillfully and in a fashion conducive to not just individual, but also to collective team and community success. Leadership with regard to this task has a key motivational component – preparedness requires investments in time and resources which compete with other ongoing organisational priorities. Universities, like many other organisations, are chronically tempted to neglect preparedness investments when resources are scarce and other matters seem more important. When a crisis is imminent, such as when meteorological experts predict that a hurricane is on its way, motivation tends to be rather higher; however, when the remaining time to prepare is very short, difficult dispositions must be made under conditions of uncertainty and often under conditions of resource scarcity. In such situations, leaders can support operational and reputational staff by encouraging a forward-leaning, proactive approach. While this may entail expending time and resources should the anticipated crisis/emergency not arise, such expenditures should be seen as necessary insurance premiums – and good practice with regard to alerting and 'standing up' the university crisis organisation – to avoid being caught unprepared and unready when crisis hits. Brennan and Weaver argue that as a part of preparing, higher education leaders need to help their subordinates develop a 'crisis mindset' to enable more rapid detection and more effective response.[15]

Universities – and their leadership teams – differ greatly with respect to their preparedness for crisis leadership. Virginia Tech's crisis preparedness was sorely tested – and some in important respects found wanting – when a disturbed student embarked on a devastating on-campus shooting spree in April of 2007. Subsequent investigations – such as the Review Panel appointed by the Governor of Virginia – found serious deficiencies with regard to university preparedness and leadership at both policy and operational levels.[16] A more proactive and precautionary approach (including prompt campus-wide lockdowns and/or

suspension of classes after the initial homicide) and more effective communication on the part of the university could potentially have saved many young lives.

It is instructive to contrast this finding with the rather more vigilant leadership demonstrated by the Ohio State University in the attack of November 2016 (see below for a more detailed discussion) in which university leaders were well-prepared and rapidly took critical precautionary measures with regard to warning students, locking down the campus and suspending classes. In fact, even before that attack Ohio State stood out as something of a leader among US IHEs with regard to preparedness for active shooter and related 'antagonistic' crises, having produced its own 'on campus' version of the 'Run, Hide, Fight' video originally produced by the City of Houston and endorsed by the US Department of Homeland Security.[17] Of course, it should be recognised that this comparison is not entirely fair as Ohio State's preparedness posture in 2016 can be presumed to have been influenced by vicarious learning from the tragic events at Virginia Tech and other subsequent 'school shootings'. Furthermore, it should also be said that there are strong indications that – not surprisingly – Virginia Tech itself has become a leader in university crisis preparedness in the decade since the tragic mass shooting. For example, according to the university website, 'Virginia Tech Emergency Management was the first in higher education to obtain national accreditation through the Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP).'[18]

*Sense-making* in crisis refers to the challenging task of developing an adequate interpretation of what are often complex, dynamic, and ambiguous situations.[19,20] This work entails developing not only a picture of what is happening, but also an action-oriented understanding of the implications of the situation – with regard to core values and priorities – from the organisation's vantage point as well as that of other salient stakeholders.[21] As Alberts and Hayes put it: 'Sense-making is much more than sharing information and identifying patterns. It goes beyond what is happening and what may happen to what can be done about it.'[22]

Making sense of a crisis – by definition an uncertain situation as noted above – is as difficult and as crucial in higher education settings as in the other institutional contexts in which crises may occur. To take just one example that illustrates just how difficult sense-making can be in the university context, The University of Virginia's President Teresa A. Sullivan was confronted with a very urgent and delicate situation in November 2014 when *Rolling Stone* magazine published a story by Sabrina R. Erdely under the provocative headline: 'A Rape on Campus: A Brutal Assault and Struggle for Justice at UVA'.[23] The story, which generated immediate and widespread attention, alleged not only that UVA's Greek system (as exemplified by the particular fraternity named in the article) and its social culture posed significant threats to female students, but that the university officials (including a named associate dean) systematically discouraged victims from seeking redress and failed to hold perpetrators accountable for their misdeeds. The shocking story drew strong reactions from students, faculty, alumni, leading Virginia politicians and the Board of Visitors, and vociferous demands that 'something be done'. It posed a potentially grave threat to the university's reputation and created an atmosphere of crisis. President Sullivan

and her team initially acted upon the assumption that the narrative in the story could be substantially accurate and took a number of forceful actions — such as suspending all Greek social events through the end of the term and declaring a zero tolerance for sexual assault.[24] In the following weeks, additional news reporting began to suggest that the account in the *Rolling Stone* article was problematic in important respects, leading the magazine to commission an independent review and ultimately to retract the piece.[25] In addition, an investigation by local police concluded that there was no evidence that such an assault had ever occurred. These developments exposed Sullivan to criticism from some quarters that the institution had over-reacted to the initial allegations, and criticism from others that it had not done enough, despite having demonstrated vigilance with regard to the broader issue of campus sexual assault.[26]

Commenting to *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on Sullivan's term as UVA president, Peter F. Lake, director of the Center for Excellence in Higher Education Law and Policy at Stetson University, said:

> I think one critical legacy from her tenure will be that modern college presidents must have great dexterity in managing narratives, and responses to narratives, alongside leading actual responses to critical incidents. … The court of public opinion is impatient – and sometimes distorted in its perceptions – placing a pressure on modern presidents to act, act quickly, and act in response to narratives even if those narratives are more compelling than verifiable.[27]

*Decision-making* refers to the fact that crises tend to be experienced by leaders (and those who follow them) as a series of 'what do we do now' problems triggered by the flow of events. These decision occasions emerge simultaneously or in succession over the course of the crisis.[28,29] Protecting communities tends to require an interdependent series of crucial decisions to be taken in a timely fashion under very difficult conditions. Furthermore, leaders — and their advisors — tend to play a central role with regard to defining crises, setting priorities and making as well as adjusting policies. The *Rolling Stone* article forced Sullivan and her team to make significant decisions with scanty information – a situation that is the norm, not the exception, especially in the early days of an unfolding crisis.

Often, leaders must make decisions in crisis situations that are marked by uncertainty, conflicts among key values and intense time pressures. Such was the situation facing The University of Oklahoma's president, David Boren, in March 2015, when a video surfaced on social media, showing fraternity members singing a song with racist lyrics. The video was recorded on Saturday, 7th March, and surfaced on YouTube the next day. The student newspaper broke the story and protesters began to converge on campus.[30] That evening, Boren told the campus via Twitter that the video was under investigation and that the behaviour was 'reprehensible and contrary to all our values.'[31] The following morning, he issued a statement and held a news conference in which he said that he had ordered all ties between the university and the fraternity to be severed immediately, with the house to be closed by midnight on Tuesday.[32] The next day, Tuesday, 10th March, Boren announced that the university had expelled two students believed to be the most culpable in

the incident.[33] The university released the text of the letter to the expelled students, which stated, 'You will be expelled because of your leadership role in leading a racist and exclusionary chant which has created a hostile and exclusionary educational environment for others.'[34]

Boren's quick condemnation of the fraternity members' behaviour and his rapid decision-making drew both support and criticism. Former US President Barack Obama called Boren's quick response 'heartening' and praised him for having 'great integrity'.[35] Other observers felt that Boren acted to punish speech, that while offensive, should nevertheless have been protected under the First Amendment.[36] And Gene Grabowski, a public relations consultant who said he had offered his services to the fraternity, told *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that he felt Boren had 'gone well beyond the decorum one expects from presidents,' while conceding that 'the court of public opinion certainly will be on Boren's side… And right now President Boren is more concerned with getting the tone right and taking the moral high ground than he is concerned about repercussions.'[37]

*Meaning-making* refers to the fact that leaders must attend not only to the operational challenges associated with a contingency, but also to the ways in which various stakeholders and constituencies perceive and understand it.[38] Because of the emotional charge associated with disruptive events, followers look to leaders to help them understand the meaning of what has happened and place it in a broader perspective. By their words and deeds, leaders can convey images of competence, control, stability, sincerity, decisiveness and vision – or their opposites. They can inspire hope and courage (as FDR did for the United States during the Great Depression and Churchill did for the UK during WWII) or hopelessness and despair. Finally, leaders have a unique responsibility with regard to demonstrating caring leadership and empathy. For example, leaders are expected to perform rituals of solidarity, mourning, and commemoration.[39,40]

A statement issued by The Ohio State University's (OSU) president, Michael V. Drake, in the aftermath of an incident in November 2016 illustrates effective 'meaning making'. Shortly before 10 am on a weekday, a young man rammed his car into a crowd of people standing outside a campus building, then sprang out and began attacking bystanders with a knife. A campus police officer arrived and shot the attacker dead within about a minute or two of the incident. The perpetrator was soon identified as a Somali-born Muslim student.[41–43]

OSU President Michael V. Drake played an active role in communication throughout the day. He retweeted the warnings from the Department of Public Safety, then later in the day issued a statement addressed to students faculty and staff.[44] This statement included four types of information: that the campus had experienced a 'violent and frightening act', that police continued to investigate, that counselling and support were available to both students and employees who were affected, and that students were encouraged to let their loved ones know they were safe. Drake also expressed compassion for the victims and encouraged the campus to 'remain united in the face of adversity'.

Drake's communications illustrated both sense-making and meaning-making. He not only provided factual information, but he also acknowledged the emotional state of his followers (the act was 'frightening') and provided recommendations for concrete actions

(seek counselling, get in touch with loved ones). Importantly, the president also encouraged faculty, staff and students to remain united – something that was crucial because of the potential for nationalistic, racial or religious tensions to erupt, fuelled by speculation that the incident was an act of terrorism.

*Terminating* refers to the non-trivial task of finding the appropriate timing and means to end the crisis, manage accountability processes and return to normalcy. This is an important and necessary task, but attempting to end a crisis prematurely can endanger or alienate constituencies who may still be in harm's way, traumatised or otherwise emotionally invested in the crisis. Crises may be particularly difficult to terminate if the operational challenges lead to a so-called *crisis after the crisis* in which serious recriminations – resulting in losses of trust and legitimacy – are launched against those who failed to prevent, respond to, or recover effectively from a negative event.[45] Terminating has two components: *ending* and *accounting*.[46]

Following the deaths of 32 people in April 2007 at Virginia Tech in the largest mass killings on an American university campus in what was (as noted above) found to be a problematic response, the university's president, Charles Steger, needed to lead his tightly-knit and severely-traumatised campus back to normalcy. Steger and his team took a number of actions in the days, weeks and months after the shootings to help faculty, staff, alumni and students transition out of crisis mode. The president played a key role in rituals, which are important to help people process grief and loss. These rituals included a candlelight vigil on the day after the shootings and a remembrance service on the first anniversary. Steger's remarks at that one-year milestone focused on acknowledging the shared grief and pain, and concluded with an exhortation to focus on the future while remembering the past:

> So, on this solemn day of remembrance and all those to follow, let us remember our loved ones and challenge ourselves to continue our personal journey to live meaningful lives — to embrace the future with hope and a sense of purpose ... to reach our highest promise.[47]

In this and many other moments, Steger consistently provided normative leadership through meaning-making and at the appropriate time, through ending and accounting.

The work of *accounting* may include submitting to the scrutiny of an outside body, as it did for Virginia Tech when Virginia Governor Timothy M. Kaine formed a commission to review the institutional response within days of the shootings. After five months of study, the panel published 21 key findings and made more than 70 recommendations.[48] Some of the panel's findings documented problems in how the incident was initially perceived by police, as well as delays in issuing warnings to the campus. In the terms outlined in this paper, these may be seen as breakdowns in sense-making and decision-making. In the wake of the panel's report, some victims' families called for the removal of both the university's president and its police chief, demands that the governor dismissed, telling news media that officials had 'suffered enough'.[49]

*Learning* from a crisis is critically important. It requires an active, critical process that documents, recreates, analyses and evaluates key processes, tactics, techniques and procedures in order to enhance performance, safety, capabilities and other key performance indicators.

The learning process has just begun when a so-called 'lessons-learned' document has been produced. In order to bring the learning process to full fruition, change management and implementation of necessary corrections must take place in a fashion that leaves the organisation with improved prospects for future preparedness, safety, or success.[50–53]

University presidents and chancellors have a vital role to play in assuring that post-incident learning is effective. They must insist that the process encompass not only the operational response to the incident, but that it also examine the broader institutional and social context in a comprehensive effort to understand what contributed to the incident and what helped or hindered the response. The above mentioned report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel is one such example. Another is the report of the independent special commission charged with determining the causes of an incident that killed 12 students at Texas A&M in 1999, when a 59-foot high stack of logs, constructed as part of an annual tradition called 'Bonfire', collapsed. A&M's president, Ray Bowen, formed the commission and granted it full independence. Bowen chose its chairman, who in turn selected the members. The panel's findings documented not only the engineering and design mistakes that caused the fatal collapse, but importantly, its report also identified 'an organizational failure… which had its roots in decisions and actions by both students and University officials over many years, [and] created an environment in which a complex and dangerous structure was allowed to be built without adequate physical or engineering controls.'[54] The commission documented failures at the individual, programmatic and organisational levels, all of which contributed to the physical failures.[55]

Bowen relied on the report to bring an end to the Bonfire tradition, a decision subsequently upheld by his successors.[56] Yet, in an indication of how difficult it can be to alter deep-seated university traditions, a new Bonfire soon emerged, run by an independent external organisation called 'Student Bonfire'. Like the former Bonfire, the entire project is managed and implemented by students, but in contrast, the new organisation claims that it has adopted the safety recommendations of the review commission.[57,58]

Effective learning from a crisis supports a leader's work to ensure that her or his campus is better prepared to respond to future critical incidents. We have observed that many organisations, including IHEs, tend to neglect this important task or take too narrow a focus. Outstanding leaders make sure that a comprehensive set of lessons learned is extracted from any significant crisis and applied to make the changes necessary to reduce risk and improve response capabilities.

## CONCLUSION

The headlines continue to show that crises are a fact of university life. Presidents, chancellors and other top IHE leaders have an important role to play in providing normative leadership to guide their institutions through – and back from – a period of crisis. Failure to perform this role adequately can lead to widespread loss of confidence in these leaders and grave damage to the university's image and brand. Furthermore, university leaders who fail to rise to the occasion in a crisis face a significant risk of losing legitimacy and credibility among on- and

off-campus stakeholders to such a degree that they may be removed from office, as occurred at the University of Missouri in 2015, when both President Tom Wolfe and Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin were forced to resign following a wave of racially-charged student protests.[59]

Clearly, universities – and university leaders – have become highly crisis-prone and vulnerable to a broad range of material and reputational threats. This has significant implications for the way that universities select and prepare not only their leaders, but also those who advise and support top leadership in crisis situations. Such preparedness begins, but does not end, with NIMS and ICS compliance and training and the occasional operationally-focused university preparedness exercise. Ultimately, university leaders are responsible for university preparedness; the 'buck' stops with them and they must be ready at all times to rise to the occasion when crisis strikes. Since many, if not most, university leaders are not used to leading under the extreme conditions and intense media scrutiny typical of crises, they and their staffs must be given regular opportunities to develop, maintain and practice crisis leadership skills on a variety of campus-relevant crisis scenarios, including both material and reputational hazards.

Specific practices that university leaders can implement include instilling in themselves and their subordinates an orientation that Brennan and Weaver have called 'a crisis mindset'.[60] This paradigm includes several key elements: quickly acknowledging that a crisis exists, having a bias towards taking the initiative and moving rapidly, working to make sense of what has happened and sharing that understanding broadly, becoming comfortable with making decisions and communicating without complete information, and empowering people to act and communicate without onerous prior approvals.

Probing questions may be used by leaders to help crisis teams better understand what is at stake in (potential) crisis, focus information gathering and advice-seeking efforts, and optimise crisis decision-making processes. Presidents should ask key diagnostic questions when first confronted with signs of an emerging crisis: What core values are at stake in this situation? What are the key uncertainties associated with the situation, and how can we reduce them? How much time do we have?[61,62]

Strategic use of social media is also crucial for crisis leadership. These channels allow rapid, two-way communication and permit universities to directly reach students and other important audiences without being filtered by the news media. There are three main ways to use social media in crisis management: (1) bottom up, as a situation awareness tool; (2) top-down, as an official communication tool; and (3) multi-way, as a platform for dynamic interaction.[63] We have observed several presidents effectively using social media, as noted above. Rapid, frequent and clear communications in the voice of the president can help dispel public alarm and aid the leader in performing the crucial task of sense-making.

It is also highly valuable for leaders and teams to engage in realistic simulation exercises designed specifically to give them the opportunity to practice their normative leadership skills in authentic scenarios. A team of experts from Swedish and US government agencies, the military, the private sector and the academic world has identified good practices for developing and implementing such

exercises. A key recommendation is that training and exercise scenarios be developed specifically to fit the unique needs of each organisation and be tailored to reflect the experiences and skill levels of the participants, their personality types and leadership styles, and the organisational culture and context.[64] We strongly recommend that university presidents bring in outside expertise to design and conduct customised exercises specifically focused on developing strategic crisis leadership skills in the university context. People inside the organisation often lack the capabilities as well as the detachment needed to design truly effective exercises to develop the skills necessary for crisis leadership (as opposed to crisis management).

There are no 'silver bullets', nor simple recipes or guarantees when it comes to the extremely challenging task of guiding an institution as complex and vulnerable as a university through a crisis; however, when top leaders understand, prepare for and competently perform their role in providing normative leadership, the likelihood of favourable outcomes is considerably higher for the university, its leaders, students and faculty, and other key stakeholders.

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