

# INDUSTRY INSIGHTS

## Personality and Leading Through a Crisis

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Every organization will face a crisis at some point. When that crisis occurs, people will turn to their leader for answers. How are we going to survive? How should we respond? What is the plan for getting us through the crisis and back to business as usual? Ultimately, it is the leader's answers to these questions and the leader's actions that determine whether an organization survives or collapses in the face of a crisis. The critical question then for organizations is this: who is best suited to lead us through a crisis?

To find the answer to this question, we searched the academic literature on crisis leadership to identify the most critical competencies for leading through a crisis. This search, which included hundreds of scientific papers, journal articles, and book chapters, pointed to five things effective leaders do during a crisis. Here we describe these five behaviors and how they can be assessed with common personality instruments.

The first thing effective leaders do during a crisis is remain calm. Crisis increases stress in everyone, which can lead to panic, chaos, and poor decision-making. A leader who remains calm – at least outwardly – maintains order and prevents panic. The key personality trait associated with remaining calm under pressure is Adjustment. Leaders who score high on Adjustment (or low on Neuroticism) are steady under pressure and convey a sense of calmness that prevents panic.

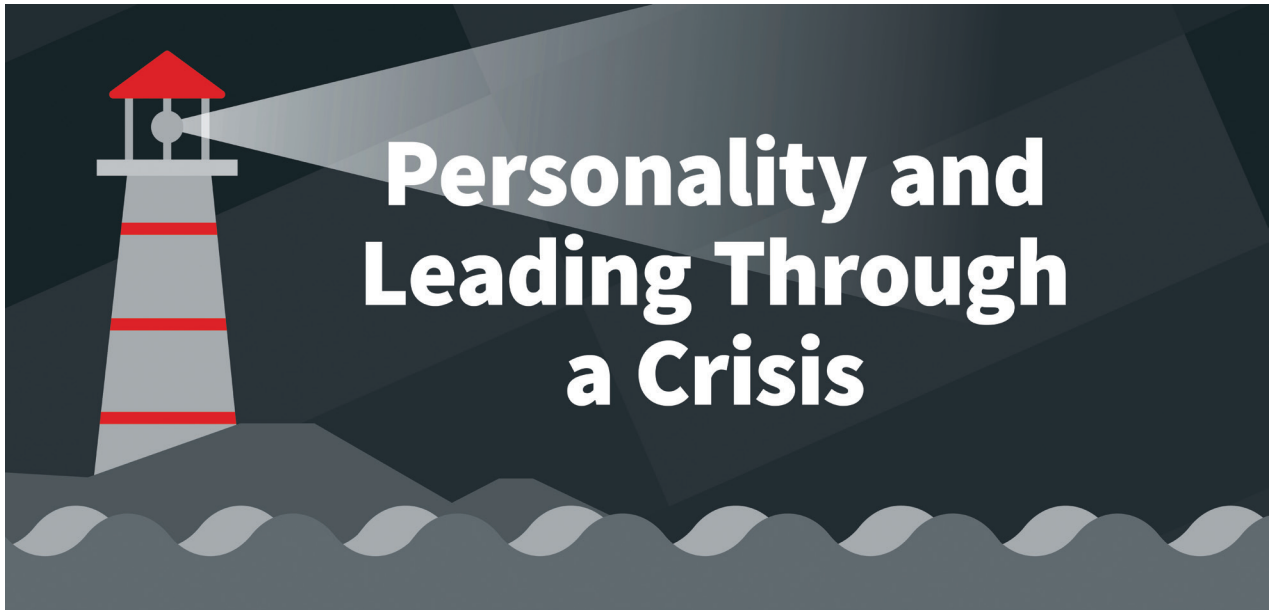
Second, effective crisis leaders show compassion and concern for their constituents. The members of the organization—employees, citizens, customers—who are most effected by the crisis want to know that their leader cares about them and their needs. Showing compassion instills trust that the leader will

make decisions in the best interest of the organization. The personality traits associated with these behaviors are Altruism and Interpersonal Sensitivity (or Agreeableness). Leaders who score high on these traits are seen as friendly, likeable, and care deeply about the people around them.

Third, effective crisis leaders get comfortable with uncertainty. Part of what makes something a crisis is its unpredictable nature. Leaders who are more comfortable with uncertainty are less likely to panic and more likely to make reasonable decisions. The personality trait most associated with attitudes toward risk is Security. Leaders who score low Security are more comfortable with risk, uncertainty, and ambiguity. As a result, they are less likely to succumb to the inherent stress of a crisis.

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Fourth, effective leaders during a crisis get realistic about the size and impact of the crisis. Crises are inconvenient. As humans, we naturally want to deny, ignore, or discount factors that are inconvenient for our plans. But, denying reality is a short-term solution that leads to long-term disaster. Leaders who are realistic about the size of the problem can best determine how to mitigate it. The two personality traits most associated with denying reality are Excitable and Reserved. Leaders who score high on these scales are more likely to deny problems and avoid confronting them.



Fifth, effective crisis leaders take charge and make decisions in a timely fashion. When a crisis occurs, it is easy to be uncertain of what to do and to freeze up. While acting rashly and without considering the information is problematic, it is just as problematic to delay action when the proper course is clear. Once the scope of the problem and possible solutions have been evaluated, people look to the leader to make a decision and to plot the course of action. The personality traits most associated with taking vs. not taking action are Ambition and Cautiousness. Leaders who are ambitious take charge of situations and try to solve problems immediately. On the other hand, leaders who are Cautious are reluctant to act and hesitate far too long.

### Summary

Crisis is inevitable. The best way to be prepared for a crisis is to have a leader who is effective at handling crises when they occur. Research on leadership tells us that the most effective leaders during a crisis remain calm, show compassion for others, are comfortable with uncertainty, are realistic about the scope of the problem, and act promptly. Additionally, these critical behaviors for crisis leadership can all be predicted by underlying personality traits.



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Ryne's previous research in personality psychology focused on the role of personality in career pursuits and workplace performance. He has also researched and experimented with new approaches to personality assessment, including unobtrusive assessment via new talent signals, such as voice prosody, word use, and affective responses to stimuli.