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## Leading in Crisis: Assumptions, Emotions and Ethics

**By Phil Ramsey**

What an emotional and exhausting time we've been having. COVID-19 has turned the world upside down, required us to make dramatic changes to how we work, and created incredible disruption for the entire educational community. While we would love for it to be over, this worldwide pandemic will undoubtedly continue to be the source of trouble, concern and frustration for some time. So it will continue to leave its mark on our schools and centres, whether we have active cases in our communities or not.

As an educational leader, how have you coped? No doubt there were times in the last few months when you felt like you had endured enough. The situation presented one challenge after another. Often it seemed overwhelming, as we tried to make wise decisions when everything seemed so confusing and complex.

While working your way through a crisis, one of the ways to safeguard your resilience and

protect your school or centre is to reflect on what is happening, seek to understand some of the processes that are taking place, and see what lessons we can formulate for inevitable crises in the future. For this reason, we decided to take some time to review what we know about leadership in times of crisis, drawing on the work of Crisis Management expert Ian Mitroff (see the book review in this newsletter). Mitroff's work is especially valuable because it helps leaders understand why crises are such an emotional challenge.

### **Crisis of Assumptions**

Something is a crisis because it demands new ways of thinking. In a crisis the old approach just gets us further into the mess. But thinking in new ways means challenging some of the assumptions we hold on to most strongly. This is what makes them so emotionally challenging.

Some of the assumptions that get shaken up in a crisis include deeply held beliefs that: the world is safe and people are basically good; the world is good and just, so bad things won't happen to good people; that crises are limited in scope, so shouldn't affect our part of the world; and that I am a good person who doesn't deserve to be on the receiving end of what is happening. Of course, most disasters happen in other parts of the world, and over time that further embeds these ideas of how things should be.

How do people, communities and organisations react when a crisis lands on them? One of the first and strongest reactions is denial; because we didn't deserve the crisis, it can't be happening, and it certainly can't get any worse than it is now.

Denial is an equal opportunity reaction. Everyone who isn't emotionally prepared can be affected, and that includes those in leadership roles. Of course, time spent in denial is time that can't be spent actually working on the crisis. Leaders who are in denial - a completely normal and understandable reaction - may get caught up in looking for others to blame or reassuring everyone that the problems aren't real. Leadership denial allows things to go from bad to worse, leading to another emotional response: betrayal.

When people have their deepest assumptions shaken - when the world isn't just, when crises are right at home - they feel betrayed. Their leaders should have been prepared. The world isn't meant to be like this, and those in charge were meant to make sure of that, to make sure we were protected. With betrayal comes diminished trust.

Perhaps you have seen these emotions on display at a national and international level in response to the pandemic. Have you seen denial - by leaders and people in general - leading to inaction? Was there a feeling of betrayal when systems that were meant to protect the New Zealand border were shown to be more fragile than people expected?

Keep in mind, it might be easier to see these reactions when it is other people's leadership under the microscope. The same interplay of assumptions and emotions may be happening in your school or centre. What can you do?

### **Being Proactive With Crises**

A crisis is certain to affect the emotions. As a leader, efforts you make to prepare for crises ahead of time, reduces the amount of time everyone spends in denial. Preparation involves thinking through the rich array of things that can go wrong; working out troubling scenarios enables leaders to confront fears ahead of time. The challenge is, doing so may seem like a

waste of time: it's easy to think, "That will never happen to us, so why spend time contemplating it?" Getting past that view is a key to being proactive.

Further, preparing for crisis involves getting serious about ethics. Earlier we considered the role assumptions play in emotions. When the world is not safe or fair and when people are not basically good, deep assumptions are shaken. But why? We assume these things because we want to live in a world that is safe and fair, and filled with good people.

Now consider: what happens in a crisis - with people already feeling stressed and exhausted - if they find that those in their own school or centre are not being safe, act in ways that are not fair, do bad things to good people, tell lies or bully others? At the time when people feel a desperate need to move toward a better world, they find they are part of an organisation that is moving in the opposite direction.

You may be hoping that the COVID-19 pandemic is over and life can return to normal. While New Zealand had early success in responding to the virus, it continues to be a global crisis. How will your school or centre deal with a re-occurrence, or a crisis of a different sort? Any crisis requires new ways of feeling, thinking and acting. A key to preparing your school or centre is to prepare in advance, and at the heart of preparation is examination of the ethics that shape the decisions you make as a leader.

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## Undoing the Splits

**By Phil Ramsey**

Like many people, you may feel a little uncomfortable discussing the role spirituality plays in leadership. Yet, Ian Mitroff considers 'Spiritual IQ' a key factor in effective leadership. What he means by spirituality is based on decades of research into how people react to crises and what they look for in leaders. How he defines spirituality may be quite different to what you expect; he is careful, for instance, to distinguish between spirituality and religion. And what he has to say has been reinforced by leadership experts like Adam Kahane. Let's consider what it might mean to develop your Spiritual IQ.



We live in a world that is marked by fragmentation. People are divided in all sorts of ways. Current protests around the world highlight the feeling many have - that communities are fragmented on the basis of race. Political divisions cause fragmentation. Citizens of one country feel disconnected from those of others. And fragmentation happens at a personal level as well. Many people feel they can't bring their whole selves to work; that they are expected to compartmentalise their feelings and their values, separately from the decisions they have to make to get work done.

The nature of a crisis is to widen this feeling of being split apart. Things feel more split apart than ever. People feel separated from one another, from their organisations and community, and from the sense of purpose they may have had.

At times leaders respond to crisis with actions that make the splits worse. They might demand that people make decisions without consideration for emotions, as though it is best to split apart thinking from feeling. Or they may set aside ethics in order to get things done. You will have seen the debate in various countries about when to open up the economy, emphasising a split between what was good for health and good for business. Many leaders seemed surprised that people weren't prepared to ignore their fears and emotions and just go back to work.

Spiritual IQ is about having the capacity to help people feel integrated - that their emotions, thinking, and ethical standards are all of a piece - and to be connected with everything else. A key ability is to think systemically, understanding that things are connected and working for the good of the whole. At a time of crisis, it means understanding that people need to grieve over what has been lost in order to restore meaning and move forward.

Adam Kahane expresses the same idea as Mitroff by calling for the need for leaders to balance power and love. Power is the desire to achieve what is important to you. Love is drive to undo the fragmentation or splitting that leaves people feeling isolated. Either one without the other is unhealthy and unsustainable. Learning to balance the two involves giving attention to whichever drive is weakest and being prepared to 'stumble' before you can move fluidly between the two.

What does your school or centre need? Have recent crises left people feeling fragmented or disconnected from one another? Look for an opportunity to practice healing the splits that stand out to you. And as you do, keep in mind that you don't have to be brilliant at doing so; like most people you will probably need to build this important capability over time.

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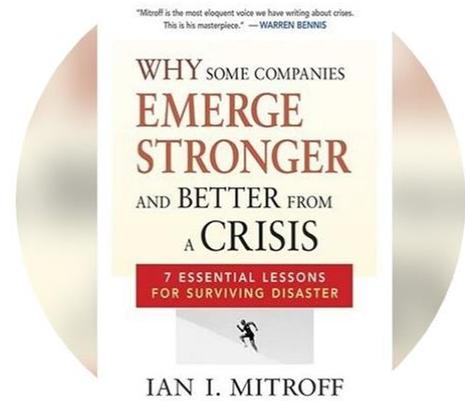
## Book Review: Why Some Companies Emerge Stronger and Better from a Crisis

**By Phil Ramsey**

Ian Mitroff is the person to turn to if you want to learn about crisis management. It is a business discipline that emerged in the 1980s when companies started having to deal with unexpected disasters, and Mitroff led many of the early efforts to understand what it takes to be successful. Many consider him the founder of the discipline of crisis management and he has been a prolific writer on the subject. This book is one he wrote several years after the 9/11 attack in the US, summarizing key lessons organisations of all sorts can learn about crisis preparedness.

Why Some Companies Emerge Stronger... deals with the complexity of crises in a way that

leaders will find seriously challenging. You may have got a sense of this from the opening article in the newsletter. Dealing with crisis, Mitroff says, really tests a leader's emotional IQ. Denial is an easy trap to fall into. Responding to the emotions of others is particularly challenging. Yet leaders need other forms of IQ as well. There is an intellectual and creative challenge as leaders seek workable solutions. Political IQ is needed to generate engagement and movement forward. Leaders need to be able to redesign their organisations to give crisis management an effective voice in decisions. And Mitroff highlights the need for Spiritual IQ to address the damage crisis does to people's assumptions about life.



As well as drawing on the experiences of leaders and organisations he has worked with, Mitroff also reflects on the nature of US culture. He discusses the fears and myths that shape US society and how these make the country crisis prone. While Mitroff doesn't discuss New Zealand society, it's useful to reflect on how our own culture might play a role in shaping our responses to disaster.

The book reflects work Mitroff has done with a variety of organisations. It is clear that sustained hard work is involved. For many, crisis management is reactive only: managing the bad publicity once a disaster has already struck. Others prepare for a very limited range of potential crises, thinking that they will be sheltered from all but the most obvious threats. For crisis management to be more than superficial, Mitroff outlines the kinds of effort that can really make a difference.

Of course, that makes it a challenging book for a leader. There are sure to be areas where you can see there is work to be done, both personally and organisationally. As Mitroff argues, the frequency and complexity of crises is increasing, so crisis management has become central to effective leadership.

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