What it Means to Lead During a Crisis:
An Exploratory Examination of Crisis Leadership

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This research project was conducted to examine the concept of crisis leadership. Many articles have been written on leadership, crisis preparation, crisis management and the tactical elements involved in addressing a crisis scenario, but very little research exists on the skills and expertise to succeed as a crisis leader. This exploratory research project demonstrated that preparation may not be the key to managing a crisis; instead, organizations should focus on developing leadership skills and top communicators should identify who are the most effective individuals to lead during a crisis and enlist them in an organization's planning and ongoing crisis management efforts. Using a mixed methods research approach, this project introduces a model of crisis leadership to illustrate what it takes to lead during a crisis and possibly facilitate future research on this topic. The Crisis Leadership Model suggests that crisis leadership involves a combination of four external factors (information gathering, external conscience, preparation, experience) and a wide array of personal and leadership attributes, built on a foundation of communications reinforced by authenticity and influence.

Organizations face unpredictability each and every day. Who could have foreseen and prepared for the contamination of Tylenol in 1982? Did Ford Motor Company have any idea that the company's sport utility vehicles would come under such aggressive attack from consumer groups and the U.S. government? How many companies could ever have anticipated the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001? Even financial crises, since the stock market crash in the 1920s to the most recent events, have caught insiders by surprise. Organizations face challenges on an ongoing basis, but are there differences between simply surviving a crisis and leading through one?

Conventional wisdom regarding crisis management leads managers to believe that a crisis plan and monitoring industry events can provide the proactive planning needed to avoid false first steps in responding to an industry event (Carney & Jorden 1993). In fact, research has shown that the better prepared a company is the more likely it is to survive a crisis, or even possibly prosper from it (Barton, Newell & Wilson, 2002; Herman & Oliver, 2002). Crisis preparation helps organizations anticipate, identify and organize strategies and tactics to prevent or modify the impact of events (Stocker, 1997). According to Gonzalez-Herrero (1995), research and planning are the most essential roles in crisis management, because they allow a company to identify and address potentially threatening issues to prevent a crisis. But as Frances Hesselbein, editor-in-chief of *Leader to Leader* and chairman of the board of governors of the Drucker Foundation, points out, crisis management is a test of the quality and character of leadership as much as it is a test of skill (Hesselbein, 2002).

Leaders today are facing an enormous test of character. According to a report from the consulting firm McKinsey, more than 65 serious financial crises occurred in the past 10 years, almost one-and-a-half times the number recorded during the 1980s (Barton, et al., 2002). Managing events in order to protect the product, brand or reputation of a company has the potential to far

outweigh any potential legal costs or stock price decline. For leaders, understanding the risks from crises and planning for them can make the difference between surviving and succumbing to them (Barton et al., p. 85).

One contributing factor to the increased amount of risk placed on leadership today is the rapid distribution of information, whereby vast amounts are available almost immediately. Technology has created more open access to information to all publics, which transforms local news into global news and internal communication into external (See the Web site www.internalmemo.com for current examples). Organizations and their leaders are now watched by the world 24 hours a day.

For all the negative news today, there is growing evidence that crisis-prepared companies fare better financially and stay in business longer (Mitroff & Alpasian, 2003). Before 9/11/2001, Tiller (1994) concluded that approximately 40 percent of Fortune 1000 industrial companies did not have an operational crisis plan, and Burnett surmised that "50 to 70 percent of the largest profit-making organizations in the United States haven't made any disaster plans" (Burnett, 1998, p. 475). However, in light of recent events, there is evidence that this casual approach is changing, and that organizational leaders are beginning to place more emphasis on reputation management and crisis planning. According to a *PR Week*/Burson-Marsteller CEO reputation survey, 21 percent of the 194 CEOs who responded said they had no crisis plan whatsoever when the terrorists events of 9/11 happened (Bloom, 2001). But the study also revealed that 63 percent have started to readdress their crisis planning in the wake of 9/11/2001, and 85 percent of CEOs said it was absolutely crucial or very important for the CEO to be the figurehead during a crisis.

The reality is that no organization can prepare for every single crisis event. This would be an impossible task, and tremendous misappropriation of financial and human resources. Despite this, experts argue that adequate preparation can help prepare for most crises, even though timing and size of the crisis are unknown (Stocker, 1997). Armed with the insight and knowledge for responding to a crisis allows leaders in an organization to be prepared for an event when it does happen.

One theory to explain the apparent apathy among leaders toward crisis planning is that executives do not pay as much attention to crisis planning because they are preoccupied with stock market pressures and the present financial quarter (Augustine, 1995). But according to Stocker (1997), there are two questions regarding financial costs that companies should assess during crisis planning: First, will the cost of sales lost and the potentially negative impact of a crisis on market share affect the company's ability to grow and increase profit margins? Second, what is the cost associated with a company's long-term market value or equity?

After reviewing the research on crisis preparation and planning, the question we must ask is this: Does the success of crisis management depend on preparation or leadership? Few people would argue against preparation as a key element to crisis management, yet when it comes to crisis communications, one of the most important factors is the least studied – crisis leadership. Flynn (2002) asserts that managing a crisis is a difficult task, and organizations must change the way they lead in order to be more aware of potential crises. Understanding the elements of leadership in times of crisis may help better

explain more than any set of crisis plans why some organizations survive crises better than others and clarify how organizations can endure future crises. While planning is important, leadership in a time of crisis, particularly in the immediate aftermath, may trump any preparation.

To understand the concept of crisis leadership, it is important to examine the existing body of knowledge on concepts surrounding leadership, not just crisis management. This study reveals the individuals who should lead during crises, and further illustrates what public relations professionals may already understand – that the CEO is not necessarily always the best spokesperson or leader in a time of crisis.

Experts at Wharton and McKinsey say that leadership can actually be found in all levels of an organization. They emphasize that leaders, regardless of their position within the organization, have several key skills, including integrity, strategic thinking, communication, persuasion and decisiveness (Knowledge@Wharton, 2003). Leadership expert John Baldoni (2004) points out that authenticity is a leadership imperative. When individuals stand up for what they believe and deliver on their promises, the payback is loyalty. Harvard Business School professor Daniel Goleman (2000) observes that leaders with strengths in emotional intelligence competencies -- a blanket term that includes, in Goleman's term, "self-awareness, managing your emotions effectively, motivation, empathy, reading other people's feelings accurately, social skills like teamwork, persuasion, leadership, and managing relationships" -- were far more effective leaders (Henry, 2003). But he further discovered that to be even more effective, leaders need to switch between various styles of leadership.

John Kotter (2001), a leadership expert at the Harvard Business School, defines leadership as the ability to cope with change. More change, he argues, demands more leadership. In similar research, others also conclude that adapting to change is imperative to crisis communications, whether it is chaos theory (Murphy, 1996), a classification matrix (Burnett, 1998), or the role of perception in crisis communications (Penrose, 2000). As a result, while companies continue to refine crisis plans, the missing element is the ability to think comprehensively about crises and their consequences (Mitroff & Alpasian, 2003). Therefore, this growing body of knowledge in the area of adaptability and flexibility can be examined within the context of crisis leadership to identify the key attributes essential to crisis leaders.

Despite the heavy emphasis on crisis planning, the profession of public relations should begin studying a new phase of crisis management by analyzing the leadership traits and qualities of individuals within the context of organizational crisis planning. There is growing evidence that crisis management and leadership are closely intertwined. Because of this closeness, we must continue to further research this correlation to better understand how organizations can lead through a crisis.

Leaders today continuously find themselves vulnerable to crises, and the need for quick decision making can force individuals to make decisions from the "gut" rather than the mind (Yu, 2003). However, true leaders can learn lessons from even the most difficult and challenging situations. In a recent study published in the book *Geeks & Geezers*, University of Southern California professor Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas, from the consulting firm Accenture, conclude that "one of the most reliable indicators and

predictors of true leadership is an individual's ability to find meaning in negative events and to learn from even the most trying circumstances." (Bennis & Thomas, 2002, p. 5). What they also identified among the 70 study participants in the book was that every leader had undergone at least one intense, transformational experience, which they called a "crucible", and that the experience was at the very heart of becoming a leader.

It is important to research crisis leadership within the context of combining the key characteristics of leadership with the elements of crisis management. When these concepts are integrated, crisis leadership is about:

- demonstrating the "right touch" in communicating with people (Beaudan, 2002);
- being effective at obtaining followers (Pillai & Meindl, 1998; Banutu-Gomez, 2004);
- providing clear direction and taking over of a crisis (Boin & Hart, 2003; Burnett, 1998); and,
- being able to identify and empower crisis leaders that have a capacity for adapting, or flexible behavior, to changing situations (Valle, 1999; Goleman, 2000).

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Research Problem

Previous studies suggest that communications is a core competency of both leadership (Baldoni, 2003) and in dealing with a crisis (Augustine, 1995; Lerbinger, 1997), but little is known about how the theory of crisis leadership is applied to successfully manage and respond to crises. It is well documented that successful leaders must adapt their behaviors to manage change as well as conflict (Baldoni, 2004; Silverthorne, 2002; Bernhut, 2001; Beaudan, 2002; Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Boin & Hart, 2003). A recent search on Google.com by this researcher shows that "crisis leadership" as a theory or concept is still very much untested (Table 1).

Based on what we already know concerning the technical aspects of preparing for a crisis event and how public relations professionals work with top leaders during a crisis, more research is needed on the topic of crisis leadership; specifically, how to discover and work with leaders in an organization before a crisis, how to develop leaders to deal with crises, and the role of the public relations practitioner in this process.

Table 1: Google.com Search

Term	Results
Leadership	20,400,000
Crisis	14,800,000
Crisis management	613,000
Crisis communications	127,000
Crisis leadership	2,830

Search performed April 28, 2004

Understanding and learning from successful leaders in a crisis may help organizations better prepare for and react in times of uncertainty. But this research may also help prepare communicators to better strategize with the dominant coalition before, during and after a crisis. In their ongoing study of excellence in communication management, Larissa and James and David Dozier noted that many CEOs "mentioned that public relations is essential in times of crisis" (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 179). If communicators can understand the leadership characteristics essential to planning, managing and responding to crisis events,

then public relations practitioners can better contribute to the overall management of an organization.

First, we must deal with the difficulty simply trying to define a crisis event. Many definitions of crisis management and crisis exist. What we do know is that a crisis does or has the potential to disrupt or affect an entire organization (Coombs, 1999). Crises also can be "show-stopping, people-stopping, reputationally defining" events that create victims (Lukaszewski, 2003). According to Pearson (1998), organizational crises are low-probability, high-impact events that threaten the viability of an organization. Pauchant & Mitroff (1992) say that crises have varying outcomes and can threaten the legitimacy of an industry and reverse the strategic mission of affected organizations. This research looks at crisis leadership from the standpoint that a public event has already occurred and is documented in the media. It will neither define what a crisis is, since each organization has unique circumstances and situations, nor will it examine how leadership can stop a crisis before it happens.

Another consideration is how to successfully measure the results of an event. Several measurement theories exist; one specific notion is for companies to use the "one-percent rule" in examining their crisis preparedness by asking, "If an event affected the price of a company's stock by one percent, how much would that cost the company's public owners, or executive management?" (Stocker, 1997, p. 197) Research continues to measure the value of corporate reputation, and some would also argue that simply keeping a crisis out of the news media is successful crisis management, which provides a completely different dimension to measurement by having nothing to measure.

In a study by Youngwook Kim (2001), the author researched and documented the economic value-add of public relations and compared it to the impact on reputation. Looking at the causal relationships among public relations expense, reputation and revenue, Kim concluded there was a valid and reliable relationship between a company's expenditures on public relations and its reputation. In the February 2004 issue of *Chief Executive* magazine, Citigroup Chairman Sandy Weill said, "One lesson we've all learned—and our company has learned it in spades—is that reputational risk is every bit as important, if not more so, than credit risk and market risk." However, because measuring the impact of public relations on crisis management is an imprecise science, it should be left to each company to decide the method, timing and investment based on the needs of its organization. This research does not fully explore these areas.

What we do know is that the definition of crisis leadership has been a subject that lacks a body of knowledge or understanding. The public relations industry must continue to research this phenomenon in order to better understand leading through a crisis, communicating with target audiences and acting as a trusted advisor to the dominant coalition. This study does not suggest that a crisis should be put on the shoulders of a single person. On the contrary, crisis management should require a team approach with people helping from multiple disciplines. A crisis management team may facilitate decision making and action by accelerating the flow of information and resources (Mitroff & Pearson, 1993). Effective group effort increases the variety of perspectives and skills available, creates synergy and provides access

to resources during crises (Pearson & Clair). According to a 2003 crisis management survey by the American Management Association, 62 percent of executives said their company has a designated crisis management team. However, it can also be suggested that crises require leaders, not just crisis management teams, to mobilize employees and build trust with all stakeholders.

An outcome of this research is the development of a Crisis Leadership Model to better understand how to lead in times of uncertainty and chaos. Models allow researchers to simplify complex processes and provide a better understanding of a research problem. The model was created by analyzing the existing body of knowledge, conducting a series of personal interviews with leading experts, and a survey of both communicators and visitors to the Leader to Leader Institute's web site. This project adds to the body of knowledge and illustrates the key factors of crisis leadership in order to learn how individuals successfully lead during a crisis event.

C. Research Questions

The objective of this research was to better understand how people lead during a crisis. By answering the following questions, we can better understand the concept of crisis leadership and how it influences public relations and communication strategies. Testing the thoughts raised by this research provided insight into the role of leadership in successful crisis communications.

> **RQ1: How do people differentiate between being a successful leader and a successful crisis leader?** According to the literature review, a leader possesses many of the same traits needed to succeed during a crisis situation. Exploring what makes someone a successful leader provided useful information that communicators can use in developing communication strategies aligned with the values and cultures of their organizations during a time of crisis. Understanding this question may also help organizations provide better leadership during a crisis.

> **RQ2: How do values and characteristics factor into making an effective crisis leader?** Understanding the most important characteristics of crisis leaders was the first step in building a model for crisis leadership, which bring together the major elements of crisis communications – planning, executing and measuring. This research also provided understanding about the external factors and individual characteristics that play a part in defining a crisis leader. By isolating key traits, it is possible to understand what makes someone successful when facing a crisis.

> **RQ3: How should the role of an organization's top communicator function in facilitating successful crisis leadership?** Communicators play an important role during a crisis situation. But beyond fielding media calls, sending internal updates and writing press releases, communicators should play an important, visible role in creating the organization's crisis strategy. By understanding the traits of successful crisis leaders, communicators can quickly identify the individuals within their organization who need to play a vital role in responding to a crisis.

D. Mixed Methods Research Method

Mixed methods research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) is a process for collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or in a series of studies, based on priority and sequence of information (Creswell, 2003). Conducting this type of study requires assigning a priority or weight to each form of data (and approach) as well as the sequence of data collection (i.e., either quantitative first and qualitative second or vice versa). It also means determining how quantitative and qualitative data will be mixed at the stages of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Research for this project consisted of two methods: personal interviews and survey research.

Personal interviews were used to investigate the opinions of respondents concerning crisis leadership. However, personal interviews are among the most challenging and rewarding forms of measurement. They require a personal sensitivity and adaptability as well as the ability to stay within the bounds of the designed protocol in an effort to limit research bias.

Constructing an online, web-based survey can be more art than science. Navigation and flow are important in any questionnaire, but they are particularly important in Web-based surveys (Redline and Dillman, 1999). There are numerous small decisions that must be made about content, wording, format, placement and length that can have important consequences for the entire study. The personal interviews were beneficial in helping to contrast the online questionnaire in order to enhance the overall results of this study.

It is important to note that each of these methods has its disadvantages. By definition, a small number of personal interviews limit the potential variety of opinions and experiences. Likewise, survey research may yield a limited set of opinions depending on the audience and the number of responses. Additionally, each method may also provide results that can be interpreted various ways, depending on the content, context and bias of the researcher.

The variety of research used for the study supports the need to continue researching crisis leadership, and to integrate crisis leadership into further research on the topics of crisis planning and management. Recent research (Coombs and Holladay, 2001; Penrose, 2000) indicates that crisis communication and the role it plays within organizations is helping to shape the perceptions of communication as a management function. Studying crisis leadership should help move communications further into the area of management studies.

E. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collected was analyzed to determine the characteristics of a successful crisis leader, as well as the role of the top communicator in contributing to the success of an organization in a crisis. Information gathered from the interviews and survey research was compared to existing literature and used to develop recommendations regarding a model of crisis leadership. Data collection for this study included the following methods:

1. **Personal interviews.** Seven interviews were conducted with experts in the area of crisis leadership (Appendix A). All seven individuals have been directly involved with crisis communications or leadership development in their work

with various organizations. If in-person or telephone interviews were not possible, survey questions were emailed to individuals and written responses were used. Interviews with experts responsible for crisis communications and leadership were essential to understand the role of leadership in a crisis. Personal experiences and opinions from these individuals provided a better understanding of crisis leadership; these findings helped gain insight into the communications management process with respect to crisis leadership.

2. <u>Survey research</u>. An online survey was developed (Appendix B) on the topic of crisis leadership and distributed separately to two audiences. The first audience was comprised mostly of communication professionals in North America and included participants from the Syracuse University Independent Study Degree masters program, as well as personal contacts of this researcher in the field of public relations. Participants from this audience in the study were also encouraged to distribute the study to colleagues in the field of public relations. Exactly 170 individuals from this audience participated in this survey. Sixty five percent of these participants consider themselves part of the communications function in their organization, and nearly three-quarters of respondents were from either consulting firms or for-profit corporations (27.6% and 42.9% respectively).

For the second audience, a reproduction of the study was posted on the Leader to Leader Institute's web site in order to compare the results of communication and non-communication professionals. Seventy-one individuals completed the study from this sample. Forty-one percent (40.8%) of respondents described their function as management (CEO, COO, partner or board of directors) and one-quarter (26.8%) were from non-profit organizations.

The survey was constructed using two types of questions, either "yes or no" and "constant sum". The constant sum method produces a ratio measurement, "whereby respondents are instructed to allocate a number of points or chips among alternatives according to some criterion" (Crawford, 1997). The data from these types of questions is powerful because it is allocates points, each having equal value, to a question or topic and weights each answer by an average, not a percentage. Constant sum data was gathered in this research by asking respondents to distribute 100 points across the answers provided in order to reveal the measure of preference or importance.

<u>F. Results</u>

<u>RQ1:</u> **How do people differentiate between being a successful leader and a successful crisis leader?**

Although much of the traditional research surrounding crisis management focuses on pre-crisis planning, there is a lack of knowledge on how organizations will react when a situation arises. Many companies may simply believe the strength of their brand and corporate social responsibility activities will be enough to carry them through any crisis, when in reality, they should be looking at building leadership theories into their crisis plans. While some crises may appear similar on the surface (e.g. plane crash), crises are very rarely ever the same inside an organization. They may share common characteristics such as loss of life, financial turmoil or a complete stoppage in business, but how people perceive and react to these events will vary. One fact

for certain that all crises share is the fact that they are unexpected and unplanned. Because of this element of surprise and/or terror, there needs to be an examination of human needs, emotions, and behaviors and how organizations will need to take action – there is a call for leadership.

In approaching this research project the first area tested was the perception of leadership and how this is applied to issues surrounding crisis leadership. According to the online survey results, a majority of respondents believe that leadership and crisis leadership are uniquely different. Nearly 70 percent (67.6%) of communications professionals believe there is a distinct difference between being a leader and leading during a crisis and 60 percent of respondents to the same survey posted on the Leader to Leader Institute's web site agreed that they were distinct roles. Only 20 percent of respondents from both surveys stated that the terms were too close to differentiate.

The Crisis Leadership Model created by this research supports the majority viewpoint – there is a difference between the two concepts. In-depth interviews provided further support to answer this question.

"There are far more people who can lead in a non-crisis situation than those who can lead during a crisis. You can see it in the decisiveness – or lack thereof – of purported 'leaders' during a crisis. They may have done just fine 'leading' the marketing team to new levels of sales achievement, but not in helping respond to accusations of sales misrepresentations," said Jonathan Bernstein, president of Bernstein Crisis Management LLC.

Since a crisis generally creates a sudden -- sometimes extreme -- change in the condition of an organization and how it is perceived by the public, there is a call for immediate action. The event itself can bring executives into the front of an event -- sometimes even serve as the catalyst to create leaders -- as the situation is amplified by media inquiries, a need to reassure employees, demands for information by all stakeholders, and the possibility for countless rumors that travel instantaneously via the Internet.

"First of all I think that crisis leadership is accidental leadership, no one knows it's going to happen," said James Lukaszewski, president of The Lukaszewski Group. "You can't pick these people out by what they currently do as managers. It's likely that a successful leader will fail at crisis leadership as much as they will succeed. And the reason for that is because a true crisis is a career defining moment for that person. And in some respects it's the ultimate in a personal stress situation."

What should concern organizations the most today is the fact that a crisis event has the potential to divide an organization. Crises events, if not balanced between handling human needs and organizational goals, can have the potential to cause anxiety, uncertainty, and doubt. Crises may even depose current and effective leaders who cannot lead in a time of turmoil.

"Leaders are expected to have the skills and expertise necessary to effectively direct organizations and people. However, that does not necessarily mean they will react responsibly if and when a crisis occurs. They very well may be successful in the everyday workplace, but fail as crisis managers when conditions become volatile," said Colonel William Smullen, director of National Security Studies at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University and former executive assistant to General Colin Powell.

Frances Hesselbein, from the Leader to Leader Institute, added to the discussion on crisis leadership. "I don't believe (there is a difference between

leadership and crisis leadership)," she said. "I think truly great leaders, leaders of change, have accepted that they will lead the enterprise in a time of crisis, and I think that crisis leadership is simply one aspect of the total leadership that we are expected provide."

Although varying definitions and opinions exist on the idea of crisis leadership, the research does indicate that leadership in times of crises is needed for an organization to gain control of the event. When a crisis occurs it requires immediate attention. Leadership skills need to be integrated into modern crisis planning and crisis management techniques to provide the necessary balance between technical execution and interpersonal relationship building among stakeholders.

RQ2:   **How do values and characteristics factor into making an effective crisis leader?**

Leadership matters more than ever, as organizations and individuals are met with increased scrutiny and skepticism from various stakeholders. The ability to manage ever-present change and lead during a potential crisis requires the skill and ability to adapt behaviors and messages that can change with the situation. A leader's job during times of distress and uncertainty is to clearly communicate a vision, allay internal fears and reassure outside participants and onlookers. They need to provide frequent, candid updates about what has happened, what is happening and what will happen, thus earning trust among stakeholders, while balancing an organization's long-term strategy with victims' short-term needs.

Crisis leadership, in particular, requires a rapid reaction to the initial event and subsequent changes in events, continuous attention to details, and understanding the spread of information. "In my view, you cannot be a great crisis manager or leader if you do not do an excellent job of communicating with all of the affected audiences -- your own employees, the party or parties who see themselves as victims of the crisis, the elected officials, the regulators, the media, and the public-at-large. In fact, being the lead communicator is probably one of *the* most important things a leader can do in a crisis," said Judy Hoffman, principal of JCH Enterprises and author of the best-selling crisis management book, *Keeping Cool on the Hot Seat: Dealing Effectively with the Media in Times of Crisis*.

Communication skills play a dominant role in crisis leadership and survey respondents agree with Hoffman's assessment. Both communicators (43.44 response average) and visitors to the Leader to Leader Institute's web site (37.99 response average) ranked this as the most important trait of a crisis leader. A ranking of the top five and bottom five traits by respondents is listed in Table 2.

While communicating effectively builds a foundation for crisis leaders, further examination of leadership skills during a crisis is important since there must be a connection, emotional and/or intellectually, with the people involved. The use of a variety of traits by a crisis leader will assist in creating a shared vision between the organization and stakeholders. Establishing this connection early on fosters trust between groups.

Table 2			
Communication Professionals		**Leader to Leader Institute**	
Top five traits (response average)		**Top five traits (response average)**	
Communicator	(43.44)	Communicator	(37.99)
Intelligence	(32.96)	Integrity	(32.00)
Integrity	(31.65)	Adaptable/flexible	(31.58)
Adaptable/flexible	(31.23)	Vision	(31.13)
Disciplined/committed	(27.74)	Courage/bravery	(29.17)
Bottom five traits (response average)		**Bottom five traits (response average)**	
Relationship building	(23.09)	Relationship building	(23.25)
Charisma	(20.57)	Intelligence	(22.40)
Compassionate	(20.49)	Analytical	(22.29)
Passion	(20.03)	Compassionate	(18.51)
Innovative	(18.97)	Charisma	(18.09)

Data gathered for this part of the survey used constant sum retrieval. Four questions contained four traits and respondents were asked to rank them from 1 – 100 in order of weighted importance. See Appendix B for complete survey results.

Simply having the presence of being a good communicator is essential, but a person's underlying core set of values helps provide the direction of communications and actions to influence and motivate staff and stakeholders. Values are strong internal beliefs that guide individual decisions and actions. In times of crisis, leaders rely on their internal values – such as honesty, integrity and family – to make decisions and reach out to stakeholders on a personal level.

"Leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do. In the end, quality and character of the leader determine the results. Within the leader you must have the values and principles that the leader embodies in their performance," said Hesselbein.

"The existence of a core set of values – pre-existing values that could be called upon in a time of crisis, whether in the forefront or background, that could be considered anchors by the organization and leaders. It's not the kind of values, but the fact of values. The existence of deeply held articulated and actionable values that make a difference," said Robert Thomas, executive director of the Accenture Institute for High Performance Business.

By studying the various traits of crisis leaders, it is apparent that the situation often determines the leader. Just as there is no "one size fits all" crisis, each crisis requires a different response. A crisis leader in one situation may be a follower in a different situation. A crisis leader in a natural disaster will need to demonstrate different skills than a crisis leader of a product recall. A crisis leader dealing with employee sabotage or violence faces an entirely different situation. Changing situations, as this research demonstrates, will call for the need for leaders to use their adaptive capacity in order to modify communication styles, organizational goals, and the approach in handling new information. Therefore, when addressing a crisis situation,

leaders must take the time to determine who they are leading, the objectives they need to accomplish and how every action they take will impact the current situation and create new consequences.

This indicates that no one should lead during a crisis without considering who they lead, what objectives they want to accomplish, and how every action they take will impact current and create new circumstances.

This research reveals that crisis leadership is a natural extension of leadership when examining the skills needed to succeed. But skills alone do not make someone a successful crisis leader. Someone may be able to communicate well, but if his or her actions and words are not aligned with the organization's vision or mission they will be unlikely to earn the trust and credibility needed to engage and motivate employees and other key stakeholders.

"I do believe that a person's true character is revealed in times of crisis, and those innate qualities are not going to be changed," said Hoffman. "Crisis leadership incorporates an ability to rapidly and intuitively make critical decisions with the traits common to all leaders – intelligence, influence and vision," added Bernstein.

Leaders facing a crisis will need to evaluate their own skill set, ideally before a crisis occurs. The values that many of the experts in this project expressed need to be sincere and authentic and embraced by the leader of a crisis ahead of time. The success of a crisis leader is measured in terms of his or her ability to influence or motivate key audiences toward a specific behavior or belief. As a result, a successful crisis leader should never be measured by "headlines" or news clips. Trust, between internal and external audiences, is the key measurement sought by communications and business leaders alike. In order to gain trust, leaders need to learn to use their value set and develop a level of authenticity. Authentic actions are a leadership imperative in a time of crisis in order to convince stakeholders what the organization stands for, what the leader believes and delivers on the messages communicated. In any crisis, whatever the extent of the damage, a truly authentic leader is able to communicate the realities and possibilities in a context of complete, unwavering honesty.

RQ3: How should the role of an organization's top communicator function in facilitating successful crisis leadership?

Communications managers should not be strangers to crisis events. In dealing with the media, employees and management on a regular basis, communicators are often called upon to help handle the latest "crisis". But what is the role of the communications professional? Do communicators help determine whether the event truly is a crisis or merely an event that requires some emergency discussions? Are communicators asked to simply "spin" a message or is management actively seeking business advice?

While a crisis plan developed and managed by a communication manager or team of business managers is an invaluable precaution, the role of the top communicator in facilitating that process is often undefined or unknown. Is his or her role to create the plan? Execute the plan? Evaluate the plan? Or all of these items? In a post 9/11/2001 era more business continuity and risk management services are beginning to take over crisis planning and crisis management.

This research indicates that communication is the most important trait for crisis leaders, which presents continued opportunities for communications managers to be deeply involved before and during an event. But in order to continue or take over crisis planning, communications managers need to look beyond communications as a skill and work vigorously to instill and secure the trust and confidence of the dominant coalition.

"When a crisis occurs, leaders tend to lean on those they trust. Often the top communicators are not a part of that. The objective of the top communicator is to be trusted advisor in good times and bad," said Lukaszewski.

One approach where communications managers can build trust with the dominant coalition and to develop a position of crisis leadership is to further enhance training.

"There are definitely things (non-communications professionals) can do to enhance their skills at crisis leadership. Increasing their communications skills is certainly one of these things they can improve through practice," said Hoffman.

Communication managers should continue to focus on issues management, preparation, and leading in times of crisis. Organizations face more risks today for legal action, negative media coverage, online rumors, societal pressures, and regulatory actions, which means communications managers also need to further develop proficiencies and knowledge outside of public relations expertise. This research suggests the communications managers should search for ways to improve their own leadership skills, strategic thinking and team management.

"A concentrated effort on finding and developing the leadership skills of key spokespersons and other managers in corporate communications as well as in HR, etc., is, although not mentioned by most authors, an essential part of any comprehensive crisis preparedness strategy," said Oliver Schmidt.

Using leadership theory and adapting these skills to training will further enhance the dialogue between communications managers and the dominant coalition. This knowledge should also be transferred into any crisis planning materials. Focusing on leadership qualities and theories can add a new dimension to a crisis plan by having the team think in terms of values, authenticity, trust and leadership, rather than simply updating materials in a crisis binder.
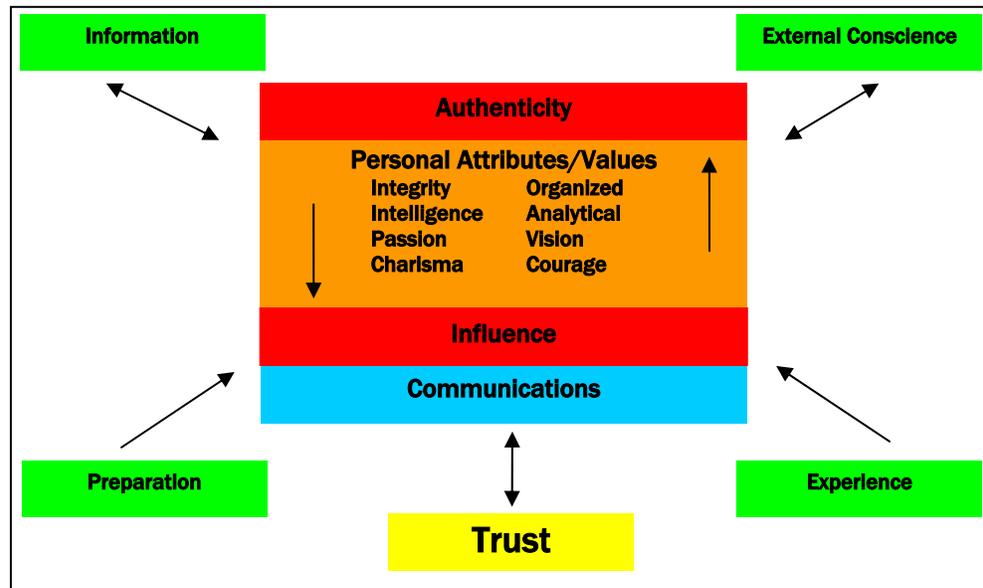
Core leadership values in recent years have focused on moving away from command and control to principles grounded in persuasion, enablement and empowerment. These new developments should not be unfamiliar value sets to communications professionals who have been working from these foundations since the profession's early history.

Ultimately, the role of the communicator in an organization is to create a network of relationships among internal teams, and build relationships with external influencers. In this role, communicators assume their own valuable role as a crisis leader by helping to set an organization's agenda and ensuring that the organization's internal systems of processes and people remain in place and don't collapse under stress. Effective communications management before, during and after a situation is critical to protecting an organization's brand, reputation and value among internal and external audiences.

G. Crisis Leadership Model

The Crisis Leadership Model (Table 3), created from the results of this research, should help communications professionals examine who should be the best person to take command during a time of crisis and it can help crisis management teams learn more about building trust with stakeholders.

Table 3: Crisis Leadership Model

Information		External Conscience
	Authenticity	
	Personal Attributes/Values	
	Integrity Organized	
	Intelligence Analytical	
	Passion Vision	
	Charisma Courage	
	Influence	
	Communications	
Preparation		Experience
	Trust	

The goal of any Crisis Leader is to build and sustain an organization's trust and credibility among employees, communities, customers, partners, suppliers, investors and others that rely on the individual and his/her organization through two-way communication. Trust allows an organization to function in its normal state of affairs prior to a crisis occurring and will be important in sustaining its reputation. But trust is earned and cannot occur without Authenticity *and* Influence from a Crisis Leader. Without these two characteristics, Authenticity and Influence, a crisis leader will lack support from the inside and/or outside. These traits are the pillars of crisis leadership. Someone in a crisis may possess every other trait in this model, but with only one or neither of these pillars they will most likely fail.

This model illustrates what is involved from an individual to be perceived as an effective crisis leader and achieve the desired results. The research conducted to produce this model is not meant to simplify or "dumb down" the process of leading in a crisis. On the contrary, this is a very complicated process that involves not only leading from the mind but also leading from the heart. The purpose of this model is two-fold: 1). to assist future researchers studying the elements of successful crisis management and leadership; and, 2). to help organizations better lead through difficult times. While management may be able to brush aside crisis planning as non-essential, this model should demonstrate that organizations cannot afford to fake crisis leadership.

External Influencers. These are factors may or may not be related to the crisis at hand, but are essential to leading an organization to normalcy.

Information – During a crisis, leaders must have ongoing, two-way access to information (e.g., research, media stories and data), in order to assess the situation and make informed decisions for the benefit of the organization and its stakeholders that will move a situation into a more positive direction. Without information, a crisis leader is powerless to make effective decisions.
External Conscience –Effective crisis leaders know that they must have someone outside of their organization who can act as a sounding board. This may be a religious leader, outside consultant, mentor or trusted colleague. This neutral advisor is a person used for two-way communication to provide direction, not answers, in order to provide a subjective approach to a crisis.
Preparation – Before any crisis an effective crisis leader needs training in dealing with the media and all internal and external stakeholders. Whether this is in the form of risk management or from an outside consultant, training will help in preparing for unexpected events and communicating results. This is one-way knowledge since leaders must use the skills acquired in the past from training.
Experience – Experience as a leader and taking charge of situations plays into the ability for an individual to take command during chaos. This provides one-way insight since leaders cannot go back in time but must draw on prior events and knowledge.

Pillars

Authenticity – A crisis leader gets ahead of the often unavoidable, sometimes unpleasant realities of a crisis event, and communicates both realities and possibilities in a context of uncompromising honesty. Authenticity requires a leader to ensure actions are aligned with the spoken word; that those actions are meaningful; and to ensure that ethics and actions are not at odds at any time.

Influence – Influence is the attempt to control messages and affect the outcomes of the situation. That is not to say it is necessarily good or bad. It is simply to say that it is just that, control. Positive influence in a crisis will evoke desired reactions and responses that help regain control over the situation and people involved.

Foundation
Communications – Being a crisis leader usually, but not always, means being the internal and/or external spokesperson for the organization. A crisis leader must therefore possess the ability to deliver news, updates and constant communication to all target audiences. The leader must also use two-way communication, which means listening and responding to questions, concerns and feedback.

Personal Attributes/Value Set
These are a mixture and combination of qualities that crisis leaders should possess. While these qualities are potentially endless to identify, this model reflects, from this researcher's studies, the key traits. The effective crisis

leader will use these attributes to adapt to the needs and reactions from his/her audiences and pull from these qualities.

<u>H. Conclusions</u>

This study examined the theory that although crisis leadership is not studied enough, it remains critical to any organization; perhaps even more so than the written crisis plan. Unfortunately, among business executives, as well as communications managers, the viewpoints regarding crisis leadership remain grounded in the tactical elements of crisis management, rather than on core leadership concepts.

This research shows that no one should equate crisis leaders with spokespeople, although it is highly likely that this may be the case. A crisis leader may be the person directing the immediate activities and could possibly be the organization's top communicator, chief executive officer or a product manager.

This research also explored concepts relating to perceptions that effective crisis leadership is attributed to thoughtful and careful planning, when in fact, crisis leadership is a mixture of many elements as illustrated in the model created. No plan could have done what Johnson & Johnson accomplished in the immediate 24 hours of the Tylenol crisis. Very little could have been done with the crisis plan during 9/11/2001 in New York City when the crisis command center, located inside the World Trade Center, was destroyed.

That said, business managers and communications managers should never discount the importance of crisis plans and preparation. Both remain vital elements to any organization and should be continuously examined. This research simply provides important and revealing insights that may help organizations and communications managers evaluate their own definitions of crisis leadership, how to develop crisis leaders that will fit the model developed, and the appropriate role of communicators in preparing for crisis events. It also points to a need for further research regarding a more universal definition of crisis leadership and the role of public relations in that process. As a result, communications managers should use this research and do the following:

- **Review the organization's current crisis plan in light of this research and think about leadership opportunities during a crisis**. Who would you choose to lead given the circumstances? Why would you choose them? Can you introduce leadership theory into your crisis planning initiatives? Knowing what you now believe about crisis leadership, how would you change your processes in dealing with management? Employees? Suppliers? Customers?
- **Think of crisis leaders in your organization now and match them to the proposed Crisis Leadership Model in this research**. Would you still use the same person to lead or act as spokesperson? Why or why not? Who in your organization exemplifies the leadership traits and characteristics that would build trust?
- **Start thinking of crisis management as relationship/human behavior management -- both internal and external.** Reviewing current studies and theories on leadership, communicators should

apply these to crisis management and strive to become more integrated into management. Does your organization exhibit signs of older, command and control leadership? If so, how can you change that to reflect existing in a changing, dynamic world?

▪ **Review your own role in crisis leadership.** Communications managers should look at how they fit within the organization and understand their leadership role in a crisis. Would you be the spokesperson or would you lead from the background? What leadership capabilities do you bring to your organization – is it upfront planning/ongoing issues management or would you be the one taking control of the crisis? How closely aligned with management are you and would you be called upon immediately if something were to occur?

Based on research findings and the literature reviewed, it is possible for organizations to develop a general model of crisis leadership that depicts the skills and attributes needed for successful crisis communication and planning. Readers of this study should reflect on their own organizations, discuss the crisis leadership model presented in this research and try to understand how their leaders, and themselves, would react in a crisis situation. This research should also be examined by managers in the areas of business continuity and risk management, as these practices begin to become more integrated with crisis management.

I. Limitations

It is important to recognize the limitations of this research. First, very little information exists today on the topic of crisis leadership, so the results of this study break new ground in an area that all organizations need to better understand; therefore, interpretations of the data and findings were purely subjective and limited to the thoughts of this researcher.

The use of mixed methods research tools also had limitations. The sample of respondents in the survey and interviews was comprised of only communicators and visitors to the Leader to Leader Institute's web site. Although this research was appropriate for exploratory purposes, it should be expanded to broader groups to see if the same results will occur.

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<u>Appendix A: Personal Interviews</u>

Jonathan L. Bernstein, president of Bernstein Crisis Management LLC, has more than 20 years of experience in the design and conduct of public relations and strategic communications programs, with particular expertise in all aspects of crisis management — crisis response, vulnerability assessment, planning, training and simulations. Bernstein is publisher and editor of *Crisis Manager*, an email newsletter written for "those who are crisis managers, whether they want to be or not," currently read in 75 countries, and author of *Keeping the Wolves at Bay: A Media Training Manual*. He has been quoted as an expert source by a wide range of media outlets, including AP, BBC, ESPN, Fox News, *The Christian Science Monitor, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today* and many local publications.

Frances Hesselbein is the Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Leader to Leader Institute and former CEO of the Girl Scouts of the USA. Hesselbein was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States of America's highest civilian honor, in 1998. In 2002, Hesselbein was the first recipient of the Dwight D. Eisenhower National Security Series Award for her service with the U.S. Army. She is the author of *Hesselbein on Leadership*, published in August 2002.

Judy Hoffman is principal of JCH Enterprises and author of the best-selling crisis management book, *<u>Keeping Cool on the Hot Seat: Dealing Effectively with the Media in Times of Crisis</u>.* Hoffman started her own crisis communications and community outreach consulting company in 1995. Since then, she has traveled around the country conducting her one-day workshop "Coaching to Meet the Press and Other Hostile Audiences" for many different organizations. She specializes in the chemical industry because of her background and experience and her uncanny ability to relate to the issues and concerns of those companies.

James E. Lukaszewski, *ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA*, works directly with clients. He personally develops strategies, oversees project activities, serves as the principal coach/counselor for all training workshops, personally conducts all simulations, and guides and directs support staff and related consultants. The Lukaszewski Group provides strategic guidance to the managements of major U.S. and international businesses and organizations on the most sensitive reputation and ethical problems -- the kind that can redefine the reputation of an organization, executive, company, or brand.

Oliver S. Schmidt is a management consultant, trainer, executive coach and senior partner with the strategic communications and crisis management firm C4CS™. He has worked with companies in North America, Europe and Asia and is a regular presenter and author as well as a guest lecturer at universities in the United States and Europe.

Colonel F. William (Bill) Smullen was appointed as the director of National Security Studies at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs in June 2003. Colonel Smullen was named Maxwell's Senior Fellow in National Security in September 2002 and at that time began his work with National Security Studies as Deputy Director. Colonel Smullen is a member of the faculty of Syracuse University's S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications as a professor of public relations. Prior to his appointment at Syracuse University, Colonel Smullen had been the chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and the U.S. Department of State beginning in January 2001. As principal advisor to the Secretary, he was responsible for monitoring and evaluating the formulation and implementation of departmental policies. He was also involved in the planning and development of concept strategy associated with foreign policy matters. A professional soldier for 30 years, he retired from the U.S. Army in 1993 as a colonel. His last assignment on active duty was a special assistant to the 11th and 12th Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William J. Crowe, Jr., and General Colin L. Powell. Upon leaving active duty, Colonel Smullen became the executive

assistant to General Powell, assisting with the writing and promotion of his best-selling autobiography, *"My American Journey,"* published in 1995.

Robert J. Thomas is the executive director of the Accenture Institute for High Performance Business in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and an associate partner who specializes in the areas of leadership and transformational change. In addition, he serves as a senior lecturer in the MIT School of Engineering. He has consulted extensively in the fields of leadership development, organization design, and in the implementation of new technology in a wide variety of global companies. He received his Ph.D. from Northwestern University. Dr. Thomas has authored four books and numerous articles on leadership, technology and organizational change. His most recent book, co-authored with Warren Bennis, focuses on the motivations and aspirations of leaders in their 20s, 30s, 70s and 80s. Entitled *Geeks and Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders*, was published by Harvard Business School Press in 2002.

Sample Questions

1. Is there really a difference between "leadership" and "crisis leadership", or is "crisis leadership" really not an individual but a group achievement?
2. Do you believe that charisma plays a role in crisis leadership? If so, can you teach someone to be a crisis leader?
3. What do you think separates a Leader from a Crisis Leader?
4. How would you compare a crisis event and its ability to transform people into leaders?
5. How does teamwork play into the concept of Crisis Leadership?

Appendix B – Online Survey and Results

1. Do you believe there is a difference between Leadership and Crisis Leadership?

	Communication Professionals	Leader to Leader Institute
• Yes, absolutely. They require different talents and skills	**67.6%**	**60.6%**
• No, they are the same	12.4%	18.3%
• They are too close to differentiate	20.0%	21.1%

2. For the following four questions it may help to think of someone you admire as a crisis leader or who exhibits traits of what you would consider Crisis Leadership. Please assign a numerical value for each of these traits. The total sum must equal 100. For traits that you feel do not apply you may leave blank.

	Response Averages	
• Disciplined/Committed	**27.74**	28.71
• Structured/Organized	25.63	23.60
• Analytical	23.95	22.29
• Courage/Bravery	25.70	**29.17**

3. Please assign a numerical value of 1 - 100 for the following Crisis Leadership traits. The total sum must equal 100. For traits that you feel do not apply you may leave blank.

• Intelligence	**32.96**	22.40
• Influence	26.66	24.08
• Vision	27.68	**31.13**
• Innovative	18.97	27.04

4. Please assign a numerical value of 1 - 100 for the following Crisis Leadership traits. The total sum must equal 100. For traits that you feel do not apply you may leave blank.

• Adaptable/Flexible	31.23	31.58
• Relationship Building	23.09	23.25
• Compassionate	20.49	18.51
• Integrity	**31.65**	**32.00**

5. Please assign a numerical value of 1 - 100 for the following Crisis Leadership traits. The total sum must equal 100. For traits that you feel do not apply you may leave blank.

• Passion	20.03	23.44
• Charisma	20.57	18.09
• Attitude	26.98	27.79
• Communicator	**43.44**	**37.99**

6. If you were putting together an organizational team, for crisis and overall management, what characteristics would you be looking for in your team members? Please assign a numerical value from 1-100. The total sum must equal 100.

• Charisma – the power of personality.	24.72	21.73
• Functional competence – ability to get the job done.	**42.29**	**46.37**
• Experience – a context similar to the need you must fill now.	37.16	34.35

7. Now, thinking specifically about the role of communications management/public relations management, what type of leadership skills would you expect from this member of your team? Please assign a numerical value from 1-100. The total sum must be 100.

- Collect information from inside the
  organization and the community at large.   25.42   26.01

- Organize messages and prepare team for
  reactions outside the organization, including
  advising spokespersons.   **32.09**   **30.26**

- Guide team meetings to develop the process
  of dealing with a crisis as well as to assign
  tasks to other members.   27.52   29.40

- Encourage team member participation in
  briefings with internal and external audiences. 18.08   18.91

8. Do you agree, or disagree with the following statement in regards to defining Crisis Leadership: "Crisis Leadership is the combination of classic leadership values, such as intelligence, influence and vision, with contemporary values of emotional power, such as adaptability, integrity and passion."

- Yes   **77.6%**   **69.0%**
- No   5.9%   8.5%
- Other   16.5%   22.5%

9. What best describes your job function?

- Management
  (CEO, COO, partner, board of directors)   25.0%   **40.8%**
- Legal   0.0%   1.4%
- Finance (CFO, auditor, accountant)   0.6%   1.4%
- Operations (purchasing, call center)   0.6%   4.2%
- Technology (CIO, systems manager)   0.6%   8.5%
- Human Resources (hiring, recruiting)   0.0%   5.6%
- Communications (pr, corp. communications) **65.9%**   9.9%
- Marketing (advertising, brand, direct mail) 06.5%   1.4%
- Other   11.2%   26.8%

10. What best describes your organization?

- For profit corporation (private)   19.4%   16.9%
- For profit corporation (public)   23.5%   12.7%
- Not for profit organization   11.2%   **26.8%**
- Government   6.5%   16.9%
- Education   10.0%   12.7%
- Consulting   **27.6%**   12.7%
- Other   1.8%   1.4%

<u>Appendix C: About the Author</u>

Allan Schoenberg, APR

Allan Schoenberg currently is the Associate Director, Technology Public Relations at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange Inc. (NYSE: CME), which is the largest futures exchange in the United States and the first U.S. financial exchange to become a publicly traded company. As an international marketplace, the exchange brings together buyers and sellers on its trading floors and through its electronic trading platform. The exchange has four major product areas: interest rates, stock indexes, foreign exchange and commodities. In 2003, a record 640.2 million contracts with an underlying value of $333.7 trillion changed hands at CME, representing the largest value traded on any futures exchange in the world.

Prior to joining the exchange at the beginning of March 2004, he spent nearly three years as a Senior Manager at Accenture (NYSE: ACN). With more than 83,000 people and net revenues of $11.8 billion, Accenture is widely recognized as the world's leading management consulting and technology services organization. Working for the firm he was responsible for global media and analyst relations for the company's Automotive, Industrial Equipment and Transportation & Travel Services practices.

Preceding his tenure with Accenture, Schoenberg was the Corporate Communications Manager with Atlanta-based Internet Security Systems (NASDAQ: ISSX), a provider of security technology software and services for worldwide corporate and government computer networks. At the company he managed public affairs, industry analyst relations and acted as company spokesperson. He has also worked with two of the largest international public relations agencies – Edelman Worldwide and Fleishman-Hillard, and attributes his launch in the profession to his days at Eisbrenner Public Relations in Troy, Michigan.

Schoenberg graduated from Central Michigan University in 1990 with a B.S. in Economics and is completing his master's degree in Communication Management from the S.I. Newhouse School of Communication at Syracuse University. He is a member of the American Management Association, American Marketing Association, Association of Business Communicators, Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs, International Association of Business Communicators, Issues Management Council, National Association for Business Economics, and is an accredited member of the Public Relations Society of America. In 2002 he helped to establish the Public Relations Leadership Award scholarship at Central Michigan University, which rewards the most outstanding student based on academic and leadership criteria.

He lives in Chicago with his wife and son.