

Leading in a Storm

10 LEADERSHIP TIPS FOR ELECTION OFFICIALS

Crises drain you and your staff, disrupt routines and demand fast, clear thinking.

In a crisis, your direct action has an impact, but as the leader of an office and the central person in a joint response with law enforcement, other agencies and vendors, your leadership skills and response to stress determine whether your office gets through and whether public trust in the election remains strong.

These qualities will be critical—the **clarity of your thinking**, and how you communicate **calm resolve**, **focused intensity** and **measured optimism**.

1 | Prepare Yourself Today to React Constructively to Stress

This guide begins with a foundation to keep you calm, focused and clear-minded.

CRISIS IS A CHEMICAL REACTION

Your brain evolved for both thoughtful action... and urgent danger! Threat response can hijack your thinking brain. Your system floods with cortisol and adrenaline telling you to fight, flee or freeze!

- **Threat-perception sharpens**, honing in on immediate threats.
- **Focus narrows**, inhibiting your ability to manage a broad-front response.
- You **lose access** to creativity, nuance and long-term thinking.

This is not a weakness. You need to work quickly and decisively. But you must manage that reaction in order to make good decisions.

- Fatigue accelerates the reaction. Exhausted leaders make bad decisions faster.

SELF-AWARENESS IS A SUPERPOWER

Before a crisis begins, know your own stress signals and habits.

- Do you get quiet or loud? Speed up or freeze? Micromanage or withdraw?
- Name one habit that relaxes you.

PERSONAL HABITS THAT INTERRUPT THE THREAT RESPONSE AND SUSTAIN CLARITY

Leaders who practice calming techniques perform better under stress.

Breathing

Slowing your breathing activates reactions that calm you. A deep breath is not a metaphor. Taking a few minutes to breathe deeply resets your threat response.

Movement

A 5-minute walk burns off cortisol. Practice today by taking a walk before decisions or moments of light anxiety, so you've built a habit when crisis hits.

Attention

Hyper-focus in a crisis drains your perspective. Stepping away hourly to walk or look at something unrelated can steer you out of anxious loops of thought.

Sleep

Less than six hours of sleep can degrade your judgment, impulse control and emotional regulation. Protect your sleep during a crisis.

These habits sound simple, but they strengthen your ability to think broadly and critically, and to manage, rather than reacting.

YOUR PHYSICAL STATE MATTERS

Your team will take cues from your reaction to pressure—the pace of your speech and how you listen. You cannot hide stress. To lead well, you must manage it. Resolve, intensity and measured optimism are all contagious.



2 | Understand What it Means to Take Charge

You can't afford to get lost in small details of incident response, over-analyzing, hyperfocusing or being overly hands-on. A leadership vacuum will paralyze your whole team and delay or derail your response. Call your team together, explain the problem and begin coordinating the response, delegating as much as you can to people you trust.

If the crisis at hand involves law enforcement, emergency management or other agencies, you may implement "unified command." This means that each agency's director manages their response, while coordinating (ideally under a framework you've set up before the crisis.) This does not diminish your central role in managing your office's response. In fact, other agencies need to see you leading.

3 | Take Action Calmly, But Decisively

Decision-making is different in a crisis. Stress compresses your thinking. Lean into your stress management habits to find balance. Maintain perspective but act decisively.

DECIDING WITHOUT PERFECT INFORMATION

You won't have full information. Good crisis leadership means making the best decision with current information and being willing to revise as conditions change.

Ask yourself:

- What are **two possible courses of action** to respond to the problem?
- What is the **cost of waiting** versus acting on what I know?
- Can this **decision be changed** if conditions shift?
- Who has **expertise I can consult** in the next 15 minutes?

If you feel pressure to act now, take a brief pause to create space for a calm decision. Then proceed. Don't fret and fritter away time. Make the call. Acknowledge mistakes without dwelling on them. Good leaders make mistakes and learn without giving up the ability to decide and move forward.

4 | Communicate Key Information and Decisions Consistently

Clear communication shapes how your office functions as a unit. Team members likely know details of your operations that you do not. Sharing information helps them understand the scope of the issues and recognize potential hurdles. And it helps dispel rumors, which breed in silence.

COMMUNICATE OPENLY AND CLEARLY

Information is powerful, reducing the stress of the unknown and helping zero in on best solutions.

Tell people what you know, what you don't know and what you are doing to find out. Disclosure encourages trust and joint problem-solving.

COMMUNICATE REGULARLY

People integrate new details through repetition. Communicate regularly through multiple channels to be sure everyone hears and understands the challenge. Just be sure that your message is consistent.

BE DIRECT

Describe what you need from each person specifically. Confusion you do not surface can proliferate and derail your response.

5 | Keep Your Phone Lines Open

Your team and your partner agencies all have information vital to a successful response. You need to be accessible to them and open to their thoughts.

Set up a call with partner agencies to ensure you hear what they know and what they need. If you don't have time to "walk the floor", let staff know you want to hear their important insights and concerns. As soon as feasible, hold a meeting or call with them to ensure information is flowing freely.



6 | Consider the Well-Being of Your Team

Do what you can to reduce the stress on your team. If the crisis has a wider impact, keep in mind that they may have concerns about family or their own security. Empathy is natural and important because these are your colleagues. Showing and acting on your concern will strengthen group cohesiveness and help staff refocus on their role in the response.

MANAGE YOUR STAFF'S CAPACITY

Crises are exhausting. Leadership requires attention to how your team is holding up.

- **Rotate staff out of high-stress roles** when operational tempo allows.
- **Watch for signs of fatigue, disengagement or tension**, and address them.
- **Create moments of group relaxation** during intense periods.
 - Schedule a pizza or snack break, or take one or two staff for a walk.
 - Remember to thank them for their work.

7 | Instill Confidence by Showing Confidence

Your attitude will be contagious, whether you're showing doom and gloom or a firm resolve to meet the challenge. Leadership demands that you let staff know you see the path out of crisis. Acknowledge the difficulties you face, but avoid dwelling on them. You must have confidence in the outcome, and express that to your team.

8 | Underline Your Office Mission and Shared Values

To dispel negative feelings that can weaken your team's response, you need to present them with a course of action, confidence that it will work, and a reminder of why it's important. Let people know your community counts on them, that their friends and colleagues can't get through without their help and that you appreciate their efforts.

9 | Sustain Your Office Till the Crisis Ends

Your obligation as a leader is to keep essential election functions running—by helping your team continue to function.

SET PRIORITIES

You need to prioritize what must be done today and what can be deferred. Examine this division of crucial functions and those whose restoration is less critical:

Critical Functions ▪ Ballot processing, election-day operations, chain of custody and certification deadlines

Important Functions ▪ Voter registration services, public communications and staff scheduling

Deferrable Functions ▪ Routine correspondence, long-term planning and non-urgent vendor coordination

What other factors will guide you in setting priorities during a crisis? (The Elections Group's [60-Minute Toolkit for Emergency Readiness](#) offers a priority-setting template.)

STABILIZE ASSIGNMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS

In song-writing, faster tempos demand fewer chord changes. When a crisis demands a high tempo of work, allow staff time to accomplish an assignment before piling more on, or your audience may lose the tune. Providing a written set of tasks or steps, can prevent the need to spend mental energy remembering multiple assignments.

MAINTAIN COORDINATION WITH OUTSIDE PARTNERS

Your relationship with law enforcement and other partners will be tested in a crisis. Schedule calls to ensure you remain in step. Communicate clearly what is happening, what you need and how quickly you can provide what partners ask for. You will need to integrate their operations and decisions into the plan for your team.

The Committee for Safe and Secure Elections bridges election officials and law enforcement. Visit safeelections.org for resources and tools to help you work together.

REASSESSING RESPONSE

A frequent feature of crises is that events unfold rapidly. If you don't schedule moments to take stock of your response and re-calibrate, you will forget, and events may roll past you.

10 | Communicate to Strengthen Public Trust

Operational continuity and public communication are linked. When election functions continue visibly and with integrity, public confidence is protected even when the crisis itself is severe.

- **Be visible to the public and media.** Only you can quell uncertainty and anxiety.
- **Speak regularly;** even brief updates prevent damaging speculation.
- **Acknowledge what happened** without speculation about cause or blame.
- **Describe specifically** what steps your office is taking.
- When law enforcement is involved, **coordinate your public messaging.**



Continue to the next page for a crisis leadership quick reference.

ABOUT THE COMMITTEE FOR SAFE AND SECURE ELECTIONS

***Leading in a Storm** is a product of the Committee for Safe and Secure Elections (CSSE), a cross-partisan organization that brings together election officials and law enforcement to support safe, secure and well-administered elections.*

*This resource complements CSSE's **Five Steps to Safer Elections** framework for cooperation between election officials and law enforcement. For additional resources and to learn more about the Committee, visit safeelections.org.*

Quick Reference: Crisis Leadership Checklist

Use this checklist when an incident begins.

Immediately (First 15 Minutes)

Confirm the nature and scope of the incident.
Do not rely on a single source.

Notify key staff and partners.

Contact law enforcement if there is any
threat to personal safety.

Take a moment for a calming exercise to
restore clear thinking.

Identify which critical functions are at risk
and assign backup coverage.

Start your decision log.

Early Response (First Hour)

Open a communication channel for incoming
information.

Brief your full team on what is known and
what is not.

Issue an initial public statement if the
incident is publicly visible. Be brief,
factual and calm.

Coordinate with law enforcement or partner
agencies as needed.

Check on staff. Be attentive to their safety
and needs, inspire them by reminding them
of their importance and give guidance on
what you need from them.

Identify any legal obligations, including duty
to report, and act on them.

Sustained Response

Continue regular team briefings at
defined intervals.

Continue meeting with partner
agencies as needed.

Monitor staff capacity.

Maintain consistent external
communication posture.

Document all significant decisions and the
reasoning behind them.

Begin identifying after-action review needs.

