

Renewable Leadership: How to Respond Well to Crisis after Crisis

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Renewable energy comes from sources (such as wind and solar) that are never used up no matter how much they're used. For the past several years, I've been working in-depth with leaders and communities in the U.S. and Australia who have experienced repeated crises and disasters. I've noted their capacity to function at high performance levels during the crisis, then use the pause time to learn and refine their responses and thus prepare themselves for the next challenge. I'm calling this capacity to keep responding well to each crisis, "Renewable Leadership." My interest has been in understanding the cyclical nature of crisis response: immediate response followed by periods of learning in order to prepare for the next crisis.

I have invited an extraordinary leader, Angela Blanchard, to teach this course with me. I met Angela two years ago while working in New Orleans post-Katrina. Angela has been CEO of Neighborhood Centers Inc. in Houston for more than 20 years; she has grown NCI into a fine-tuned, heart-filled, smart and very large organization capable of responding to a host of community needs, including crises and natural disasters, such as Hurricanes Katrina and Ike. Angela and NCI also are among the nation's leaders in dealing compassionately and intelligently with immigration. NCI operates 60 neighborhood centers that include daycare, tax services, adult education and case management. They continue to expand their services as the needs of the community indicate (e.g. a local credit union and housing refurbishment have just started.) see www.neighborhood-centers.org

From Angela and other extraordinary leaders, I've come to realize that the lessons learned during from such terrible crises as natural disasters are fully relevant to all organizations and all situations during this era of turbulence and uncertainty. How does any organization not only respond, but also grow and learn, so that it is better positioned for the next disruption or crisis? How does an organization or community grow in resiliency and intelligence in these chaotic times?

Renewable leadership relies on the skills, intelligence, generosity and caring of people within the organization and the community of stakeholders. These leaders know how to build a strong container for self-organization, where people use their own intelligence and experience to decide how best to respond in the moment.

Creating this container requires several fundamental conditions and actions:

- The leader has a clear theory of action that explains why people do what they do, and dedicates time to educating everyone to become skilled in its application.
- The leader is present, available, appreciative and communicating constantly.
- The leader knows the roadmap of the journey out of the current crisis and constantly draws attention to the progress that's been made and where the organization is on this journey of recovery.
- A strong web of relationships among staff is woven ahead of time and tended to over time.
- People know how to learn; time and resources are given to making learning visible and sharing it among all stakeholders.
- The organization knows itself, what its capacities, strengths and weaknesses are.
- The organization is clear at its core: everyone knows what the expectations, standards and values are and how to embody them in whatever the context.

Day One: Self-Organization. Lessons from Chaos and Complexity Theory.

Order without control. Control from coherence; creating clarity at the core and bounded autonomy among individuals; how to achieve reliable patterns of performance; relying on people's intrinsic motivation.

Day Two: Having a clear theory of action. Knowing why you do what you do; developing and refining the theory based on experience; educating all in understanding and practicing this. What's your own theory of action?

Day Three: Communication that makes a difference. Before crisis: clear, truthful, reliable information about who the organization is—the practice of non-denial. During crisis: the role of reliable sources, issues of frequency and content; telling the story as the story is being made, and afterwards.

Day Four: Creating a culture of learning that weaves the web of relationships. Relationships of trust and capacity are created through rich learning exchanges. How to embed learning in the day-to-day organization; how to ensure learning during and after a crisis response.

Day Five: Personal qualities of the leader. How to ensure your ability to be present, centered and available. The power of discipline to develop mastery. Preserving your health and well-being. Perseverance, staying the course for the long term.

For more information or to register, contact:

<http://www.cape.org/2009/wheatley.html>

