

Leadership When Events Don't Play By the Rules

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We are all struggling with events that don't make sense. They don't make sense for at least two reasons, and those reasons are leverage points where leaders can make a difference. Two of the reasons why these are such trying times are signaled in the following quotations:

1. "We tolerate the unexplained but not the inexplicable" (Erving Goffman).
2. Our ability to deal with chaos depends on structures that have been developed before the chaos arrives. When the chaos arrives, it serves as "an abrupt and brutal audit: at a moment's notice, everything that was left unprepared becomes a complex problem and every weakness comes rushing to the forefront. The breach in the defences opened by crisis creates a sort of vacuum" (Pat Lagadec).

Things seem inexplicable. And to make it worse, many of our ways of making sense of the inexplicable seem to have collapsed. Our weaknesses come rushing to the forefront. The first impulse is to grasp for some explanation, any old explanation. And what we get hold of are the automatic explanations we have lived with longest and invoked most often. We often find the initial meaning of events by drawing inferences from how we feel. Since many of us feel frightened and out of control, then this must "mean" that whatever we face is something we need to flee from or fight. Neither explanation is profound. But either explanation is better than nothing. Either explanation, oddly enough, is soothing, since the prospects of having no explanations at all and no ways to cope, are even more frightening.

The combination of inexplicable events and weakened resources for sensemaking is part of the scenario that leaders face right now. If we pose the challenge in that manner, then there are things a leader can do.

First, it's important to emphasize that the leader is just as susceptible to the tendencies we have just outlined as is anyone else. Part of leading is to accept what has happened so that it is possible to take a small next step in the direction of recovery. And part of acceptance is the realization that people often go through at least three stages when they deal with the inexplicable: superficial simplicity, confused complexity and profound simplicity. The tendency to see inexplicable events as a time to flee corresponds to superficial simplicity. People soon realize that "it's not quite that simple." But the moment they admit that, and the moment they start to build a more nuanced explanation, then confused complexity floods in. That's what makes it tough to lead. Leaders know they need to listen, tell, structure and trust, but in what sequence? With what blend? What is really tough is that when things are inexplicable, superficial simplicities feel like solid explanations, at least for a short while. But as these superficialities begin to unravel, and as complexities and nuances begin to surface, the specter of an unwelcome return to the inexplicable resurfaces. That is the moment of truth for leaders dedicated to the repair of what has been brutally audited. The "attack on America" is complex in its origins, complex in its effects. The leader who struggles with those complexities, and who helps others struggle with those complexities, is helping people with the process of sensemaking.

On the far side of complexity lies profound simplicity. These simplicities may sound a lot like the near-side superficial simplicities that you and others started with. But that apparent similarity is deceiving. Profound simplicities mean something very different. They are seasoned simplicities, simplicities that have been tested by mentally simulating their consequences, simplicities that reaffirm what it means to be a human being.

What I have just described is part of what a leader needs to have in mind to lead in trying times. If the leader moves from the superficial to the profound, and does so publicly, so much the better. Public sensemaking demonstrates that the struggle for sense is a shared struggle, that there are no experts and that there are no easy answers. But if public sensemaking is too much to ask, then before you tackle the tough task of helping others make sense, be sure privately that you're at least moving away from the superficial. Like all of us, you're probably struggling in the midst of confused complexity. But when you face the inexplicable, confusion is normal natural trouble. The presence of confusion can be a sign of active sensemaking that is moving toward more profound simplicities. The skill of the leader involves not being paralyzed by confused complexity, not allowing others to give up when their confusions are complex, and providing resources that enable the recovery to keep moving.

- And what resources can help? Crucial resources for sensemaking are summarized by the acronym, SIR COPE: Social, Identity, Retrospect, Cues, Ongoing, Plausible, Enactment. Those seven words point to ways in which one can lead when events don't play by the rules and people face the inexplicable.
- **Social:** People don't discover sense, they create it, which means they need conversations with others to move toward some shared idea of what meanings are possible. As a leader, encourage conversations, don't treat them as malingering.
- **Identity:** The first identities that surface in an inexplicable event, identities such as "victim" or "fighter," lock people in to overly limited options. As a leader, help people solidify other identities such as sounding board, witness, source of resilience, information hub, story-teller, companion, care-giver and historian, all of which are roles that help people build a context that aids explanation.
- **Retrospect:** Faced with the inexplicable, people often act their way out of their puzzlement by talking and looking at what they have said in order to discover what they may be thinking. How can I know what I think until I see what I say? As a leader, make it possible for people to talk their way from the superficial, through the complex, on to the profound. Listen to the words people are saying, help them find other words that connect with human strengths rather than with darkness and evil. Help them talk their way into resilience.
- **Cues:** People deal with the inexplicable by paying attention to a handful of cues that enable them to construct a

larger story. They look for cues that confirm their analysis; and in doing so, they ignore a great deal. As a leader, help people expand the range and variety of cues they include in their stories. You know this will heighten confused complexity. But you also know that confusion can provide a transition between the superficial and the profound if people struggle with a wider range of issues and complexities before they settle for their "answer."

- **Ongoing:** Sensemaking is dynamic and requires continuous updating and reaccomplishment. As a leader, don't let people languish in the feeling, "Now we have it figured out." They don't have it figured out. Why? It's not that kind of an issue. Recovery is about workable, plausible stories of what we face and what we can do. But these are not final stories. They are stories that should be modified based on new inputs and new opportunities and new setbacks.
- **Plausibility:** What is unsettling when people face the inexplicable is that they tend to treat any old explanation as better than nothing. There's something healthy about that tendency because it provides a kernel around which people can organize a story. The initial story may be a stretch. But it makes some sense of the senseless. As a leader, don't let the first plausible account be the last possible story. The first plausible account is assembled to help people make meaning. It is not assembled in the interest of accuracy. We seek swift plausibility rather than slow accuracy in inexplicable times simply because we need "an" explanation, not "the" explanation. Help people get that first story. But then help them revise it, enrich it, replace it.
- **Enactment:** Most of all, in inexplicable times, people have to keep moving. Recovery lies not in thinking then doing, but in thinking while doing and in thinking by doing. No one has the answers. Instead, all we have going for us is the tactic of stumbling into explanations that work and talking with others to see whether what we have stumbled into is in fact part of an answer. As a leader, help people keep moving and keep paying attention. When people are animated, their actions are small experiments that help make sense of perilous times. Wise leaders protect that process and that truth.

Footnotes:

Erving Goffman's comment about the inexplicable is found on p. 30 of his book **Frame Analysis**, published in 1974 by Harvard University Press.

Pat Lagadec's comment about a brutal audit is found on p. 54 of his book **Preventing Chaos in a Crisis**, published in 1993 by McGraw-Hill.

The idea of profound simplicity is discussed in William Schutz's 1979 book **Profound Simplicity**, published by Bantam. The analysis of sensemaking is based on two books, **Sensemaking in Organizations** (Sage, 1995) and **Making Sense of the Organization** (Blackwell, 2001), both written by Karl Weick.

The sensemaking analysis also is derived from **Managing the Unexpected**, a book published by Jossey-Bass in 2001 and co-authored by Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe.