

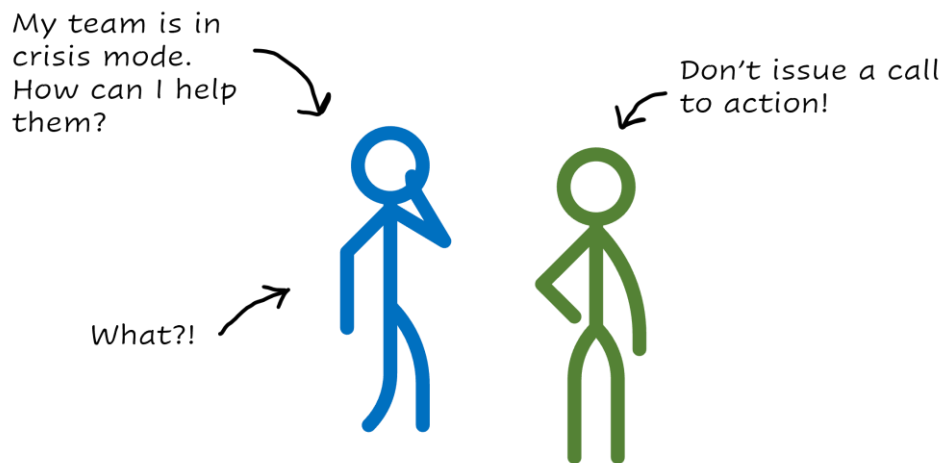
Don't Cheerlead During a Crisis ¹

Jeff Oltmann

Losing Confidence

Joshua Winans, CEO of TheraTech, has a crisis on his hands. TheraTech is a research company in growth mode – and also in a cash crunch. Its game-changing new product is almost ready, but first shipments continue to slip due to unexpected technical and supply chain problems. At the board meeting last week, investors mandated immediate layoffs to reduce cash burn.

To get across the finish line, what Joshua's team needs most from him is a motivational speech that reminds them of the vision and spurs them to action, right?



Maybe not. Psychiatrist and professor of organizational behavior Gianpiero Petriglieri observes that in times of crisis, people are already motivated to move, but they often flail. More than a call to action, they need guidance on how to move with purpose.

Holding

Petriglieri emphasizes two key actions for leaders in a crisis: 1) helping their team make sense of a confusing situation, and 2) soothing the team's distress. In Petriglieri's field of psychology, this is known as "holding." Holding acknowledges difficulty without giving in to

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powerlessness. At work, holding is offering calm and clear thinking, reassuring people, and helping them stick together.

How to Hold Your Organization

Here are some pragmatic ways you can hold your organization.

1. **Explain:** Communicate the reasoning behind actions and decisions. Explain how people's jobs may change.
2. **Clarify:** Offer thoughtful interpretations of the situation that cut through ambiguities. Clarify priorities and suggest next steps.
3. **Unify:** Go out of your way to encourage people to participate in decisions and work together to adapt to new challenges. Promote dialog and discourage divisions.
4. **Be Honest:** Dispel rumors, communicate what you know, and admit uncertainties.
5. **Be Fair:** Reinforce policies and procedures that try to treat people fairly.

How to Hold a Person

Organizations are made up of living, breathing people. Here is how you can provide holding in your personal interactions.

1. **Make space:** Avoid command and control. Be available and attentive but not smothering.
2. **Listen:** Focus on the other person's immediate experience. Be present now, rather focusing on the future.
3. **Encourage:** Allow the other person to express what they are feeling about the crisis. Encourage curiosity about potential ways to move.

Why It Works

Petriglieri argues that holding is more effective than sending out a stream of upbeat messages. It lays the groundwork for an effective vision. He concludes that the most compelling and enduring leaders “started with a sincere concern for a group of people, and as they held those people and their concerns, a vision emerged. They then held people through the change it took to realize that vision, together.”

By holding instead of cheerleading, Joshua can position the TheraTech team to survive the crisis and realize the new product vision they have worked so hard for.

About the Author



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Jeff Oltmann is a seasoned leader with over 30 years of experience advising clients, managing successful technology programs, and developing new products. His specialties include strategy deployment, operational and project excellence, and project portfolio management. As principal consultant at Synergy Professional Services, Jeff advises leaders and teams in diverse sectors including healthcare, research, bioscience, and technology product development.

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