



## Governance for Crisis Response

### The right questions at the right time: a brief guide for CEOs & Boards

In times of crisis it's key to prioritise our resources, time energy and this includes the focus of Board discussions.

#### Modes of Governance

In a Governance as Leadership<sup>1</sup> approach board discussions are categorised into three modes fiduciary, strategic and generative.

**Fiduciary mode:** 'ensuring things are done right' being accountable for performance results, monitoring the execution of the plan, compliance; safeguarding and optimising assets

**Strategic mode:** 'ensuring we are doing the right things' assessing what is going on internally and externally, thinking about a desired future, and exploring ways to close the gap between the two

**Generative mode:** 'ensuring we are asking the right questions' reframing problems and issues, challenging assumptions considering how else we might look at this

#### Stages of a crisis

Typically, any crisis event will include a series of management stages. The table below illustrates a progression from the initial period of confusion where effective decision making is problematic, through to a point where it's possible for recovery measures to be implemented. Note that it's possible to move left as well as right along the continuum, depending on how the crisis unfolds.

Confusion	Coordination	Consolidation	Stabilisation	Recovery
limited information	Information gained	information shared	information flows	communication focused
poor coordination	coordination begins	coordination matured	process is established	processes matured
resources not mobilised	resources reallocated	resources arrive	resources in play	resources demobilised

#### Governance in times of crisis

Combining these we can generate a matrix of helpful questions to help focus the Board on the priorities at each stage and provide greater support and clarity to the CEO; this helps the organisation move through the crisis faster, with less negative impact.

The table over has sample questions that you can adapt for your organisation and governing structure.

<sup>1</sup> Original source: Source: Chait, R., Ryan, W. & Taylor, B. (2005) *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards*.

Sample questions for the Board at each stages of a crisis					
	Confusion	Coordination	Consolidation	Stabilisation	Recovery
Generative	What's our role at this stage?				
Generative	What questions should we be asking at this stage?				
Strategic	What should we prioritise / stop?	What partner support can we offer / call on?	What projects, skills should we develop?	How has the internal and external context changed?	Can we mitigate against this in future?
Strategic	What are our greatest vulnerabilities?	How do we leverage our strengths?	What are we learning?	Are we (re) building the same strategic objectives, can we be more 'agile'?	How should we monitor external and emerging trends?
Fiduciary	What are the immediate actions: finances, legal, projects, people, comms	Where do we (re)allocate resources?	What tools or tech could further improve our effectiveness?	What resources will be reallocated, when and where?	What are the mitigation & resourcing plans: finances, legal, people, comms
Fiduciary	How do we keep people safe and well?	What do / don't we have in terms of reliable data?	What new policies need to be written up?	What are the longer-term risks for staff and finances?	Is the business continuity plan fit for purpose?

### A note on 'being generative' in a crisis

It can be tempting to dive into the fiduciary risk management issues, but even at the early stages it's crucial to keep a view to the long term and consider two fundamental generative questions:

#### 1. What questions should we be asking at this stage?

Review the sample questions and adapt these for your organisation identifying the top 5-6 questions the Board needs to focus on at each meeting. For example, 'What is it critical not to lose sight of during this crisis?'

#### 2. What's our role at this stage? Examples may include

- the practical; such as, sharing relevant skills and experience, forming task-committees, being unambiguous in decisions, or defining principles and guidelines to assist the CEO in their decisions without needing to wait for the full Board to sign off
- the psychological; such as, being actively supportive, embody organisational values, demonstrating trust in the team

It would be an error to think that the answers to any of the above 'go without saying', in time of challenge 'how we will do what we do' needs to be articulated collectively and unambiguously.

Inevitably, at the start fiduciary and strategic matters will take the longest part of the agenda, but the generative should take the first and last part of the Agenda.

Every crisis gives its leaders the challenge and opportunity to demonstrate clarity awareness and grace. It can strengthen the Board - CEO relationship and organisational leadership and build foundations for greater resilience and effectiveness in future.

Stay well.

I have years of experience of crisis management running large humanitarian aid programmes before becoming a CEO and Strategy Leadership Consultant.

If you would like to have an informal chat about this paper or how I could support you, please drop an email to [jane@omnianda.com](mailto:jane@omnianda.com)