

CRISIS AGILITY: RESILIENCE AS A SKILL SET

In a world of constant disruption, resilience depends on more than the ability to endure. Effective crisis response requires capabilities that can be learned and practised: recognising what is happening, responding purposefully and adapting as conditions change.

1 *As disruption becomes more frequent and complex, effective crisis management is increasingly important to organisational resilience.*

2 *Experience remains a powerful teacher, but individuals and organisations can also learn principles and practices that help them respond to crises promptly and purposefully.*

3 *Diagnosing a crisis before acting is critical to determining the right response and avoiding actions that may worsen the situation.*

Popular dictionaries regularly publish an annual “Word of the Year”. 2026 will, no doubt, see many candidates for that honour, but my bet is on the word “resilience”. If resilience itself is not chosen, the winning word may well describe either a component of resilience or a catalyst for it. The term is now on nearly every set of lips linked to geopolitics, international security and public policy, and one need not look far to see why.

The world is becoming increasingly disrupted—and disruptive—with multiple crises converging across many fronts: trade relationships subsumed by Great Power competition that throw supply chains off balance; an increasingly distorted information landscape that creates fertile ground for scams and security threats; new health risks emerging fresh after a global pandemic; and, in the background, the encroaching climate crisis turning up the temperature, both literally and figuratively.

There is a term, coined nearly forty years ago, that describes the world we are living in: VUCA.¹

- **Volatility** and chaos shred our sense of safety and stability.
- **Uncertainty** force-feeds stress and anxiety.
- **Complexity** can be overwhelming, breeding a sense of helplessness.
- **Ambiguity** erodes trust in institutions and belief in the reliability of any information.



The VUCA world, which we have been warned about for decades, is no longer an abstract idea. In such conditions, how can we invest, enter contracts, create new policies or make consequential decisions without apprehension? This is where resilience matters.

UNDERSTANDING RESILIENCE

We generally understand resilience when the term is used in a particular context. But the term is being pulled in so many directions, to serve so many purposes, that it can begin to feel like a harbour in the tempest: an all-purpose refuge from disruption, or simply the will to survive. For resilience to be useful as a concept, however, we need to be clearer about what it means. One of the best explanations of resilience, and the four main concepts that define it in practice, comes from the field of reliability engineering.²

1. Resilience as **robustness**, or the ability to absorb shocks.
2. Resilience as the capacity to **rebound** and/or recover after a crisis or traumatic event.
3. Resilience as the capacity to **adapt** to sudden shocks, traumatic events or change.
4. Resilience as the capacity to **sustain adaptability** through time and changing conditions. The truly resilient are those who are prepared for just about anything, and who have the ability to withstand it.

Understanding the key concepts of resilience is one thing, understanding resilience *in practice* is another. The best—though often most costly—way to learn is through experience: being at the front line when a team or organisation confronts a crisis; seeing which capabilities enable it to absorb the shock, recover and adapt; learning what those qualities look like on the ground. Societies that confronted SARS and COVID-19, for example, have experience they can draw on when the next health crisis emerges. In a similar vein, when I was training and advising Siam Commercial Bank in Crisis Leadership some years ago, the team I worked with had already faced several serious floods, a Global Financial Crisis and more than one military coup. Some had also lived through the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997.

Enduring multiple crises does not, by itself, guarantee resilience. But the familiarity that comes from that experience can reduce the shock, awe and feelings of helplessness that often accompany a crisis. Experience cannot be *taught*. What can be taught are principles, practices and ways of responding that can help individuals, organisations and societies to prepare, act with greater purpose and build agility to adapt under pressure.

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EIGHT BEHAVIOURS THAT EXACERBATE A CRISIS

One way to understand effective crisis response is to contrast it with behaviours that commonly make difficult situations worse.

1. **Denial:** The cognitive dissonance that allows someone confronted by crisis to rationalise alternate explanations for what is happening.
2. **Delay:** The hesitation that stems from indecision and results in missed opportunities to ameliorate the consequences of a crisis.
3. **Paralysis:** The “freeze” in “fight, flight or freeze”, paralysis is the prolonged inability to act when action is needed, often because fear and uncertainty have become overwhelming.
4. **Panic:** When fear hits the tipping point that overrides rational thought and decision-making.³
5. **Flight:** When overwhelmed by crisis, one may feel that walking—or running—away is the only option.
6. **Overconfidence:** A big ego is a blindfold in a crisis. Some use crises as a personal opportunity to shine, believing they can wrest control of a situation that, by definition, does not allow it.
7. **Wishful Thinking:** While an unwavering belief of an eventual return to normalcy can add to one’s crisis endurance, unfounded optimism can lead to serious consequences. The “Stockdale Paradox”⁴ captures the difficult balance between maintaining hope and confronting reality under extreme circumstances.
8. **Reacting:** Many crisis-management mistakes occur when one allows events to dictate their actions rather than responding purposefully to influence—not control—the situation and ameliorate its consequences.

SIX RESPONSES THAT CAN DEMONSTRATE AND BUILD RESILIENCE

Paired against the eight behaviours that exacerbate crises, these are six practices that can help address crises productively and build resilience over time.

1. Confront and Accept the New Reality (Denial, Overconfidence, Wishful Thinking)

When crisis strikes, there is almost always an initial moment of realisation where something is clearly wrong, but we have yet to grasp the consequences. When the first plane hit the World Trade Center in

New York on September 11th, 2001, many first considered it an accident, because the alternative was simply unthinkable. Those who can revise their assumptions as the evidence changes, confront the new reality and recognise the dangers of denial and unfounded optimism are better positioned to act and recover.

2. Prepare Before Crisis Strikes (Delay)

Thoughtful but delayed action in the early stages of a crisis can result in missed opportunities, forcing teams to play catch-up at critical moments. Crafting a detailed crisis management plan well in advance can prevent these costly delays: determining key individuals and responsibilities for effective crisis response; establishing lines of communication for efficient information sharing; and creating a playbook for documentation and institutional memory.

3. Delegate Responsibilities (Flight)

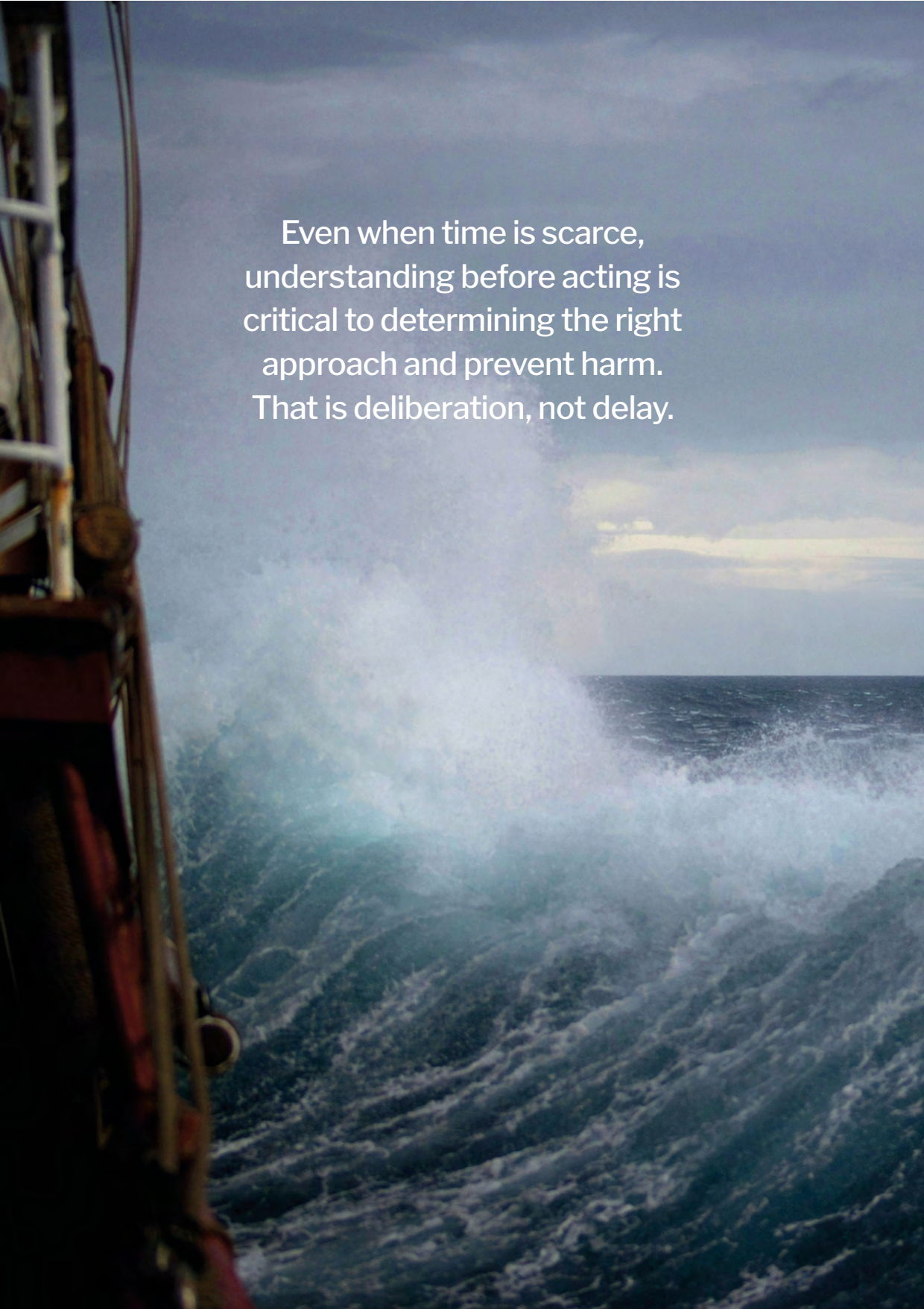
Some leaders may attempt to “control” the situation, believing that, because they are responsible for a team’s performance, they must make—or at least sign-off on—every decision. Other leaders may do the opposite, shirking responsibility onto others in fear of accountability for their team. A useful model for crisis leadership is that of an orchestra conductor: someone who does not play every instrument but rather remains responsible for guiding the orchestra and coordinating the players.

4. Constructive Activity (Paralysis)

It is not enough to have lists of assigned responsibilities and established communications channels. From the moment a crisis strikes, ensuring everyone has meaningful work to do is essential to preventing paralysis, even if some tasks may seem menial at the time.

5. Practise Interoception (Panic)

According to the Open Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science,⁵ interoception refers to “how the brain senses, consciously or unconsciously, physiological signals coming from inside the body.” In a high-stress situation, consciously noticing changes in one’s heart rate or breathing can provide a practical way to recognise one’s own stress response and regain focus before acting.



Even when time is scarce,
understanding before acting is
critical to determining the right
approach and prevent harm.
That is deliberation, not delay.

6. Respond with Purpose (*Reacting*)

A simple litmus test to know if we are responding purposefully is to ask two key questions: “What *caused* you to do it?” and “What is your *purpose* for doing it?” If you are unable to identify a response for the second question, you may be allowing crisis to dictate your actions. Asking yourself (and others) the purpose for doing something can help avoid costly, reactive decisions.

UNDERSTANDING BEFORE RESPONDING

Our brains are inclined toward action whenever we encounter a problem. Organisations tend to reinforce this instinct by rewarding quick and decisive actions against a given problem. However, acting before understanding the nature of a problem risks worsening the situation. This can be illustrated using the scenario of a sudden fire in a kitchen.

For many, it is natural to think that, when a fire erupts, throwing water at it would extinguish the flames. In a video I show to participants in my Crisis Leadership course for Sea-Change Partners, a kitchen staff acted on precisely that assumption.

That response might work in many circumstances—but not when the fire is a grease fire.

In the video, throwing water on the grease fire caused it to erupt, resulting in casualties for three of the kitchen staff, including the person who had acted quickly.

Even when time is scarce, understanding the challenge before acting is critical to determining the right approach and preventing further harm. That is deliberation, not delay.

DIAGNOSING A CRISIS

We can use the tools of Crisis Diagnosis to understand how to approach a crisis and determine the next steps. Much as a doctor can diagnose illness or injury because human bodies share a common anatomy, crises also have recurring elements. Natural disasters, industrial accidents and even political conflicts differ greatly, but they can still involve similar forms of time pressure, high stakes, uncertainty, emotion and consequential decisions. Identifying those elements gives us a diagnostics checklist for a more purposeful—and less reactive—response.

WHAT IS A CRISIS?

The American Heritage Dictionary defines a crisis as the following (with emphasis added):

1. A crucial or **decisive** point or situation; a turning point.
2. An **unstable** condition, as in political affairs, involving an impending abrupt or **decisive change**.
3. A sudden change in the course of a disease or fever.
4. An **emotionally stressful** event or a traumatic change in a person's life.
5. A point in a **story** or **drama** when a conflict reaches its highest tension and must be resolved.

The definition itself offers clues as to the elements that make a crisis a crisis. Here are the elements that constitute the anatomy of any crisis:

- ✓ **Time Pressure**
- ✓ **High Drama**
- ✓ **Important Decisions**
- ✓ **High Stakes**
- ✓ **High Emotion**
- ✓ **Great Uncertainty**
- ✓ **Subject to Perspective**

CRISIS DIAGNOSTICS CHECKLIST

For each of these elements, one can identify a series of diagnostic questions and qualities. Doing so turns diagnosis into productive work that can also be delegated across a team.

Time

Time is a major source of pressure in a crisis and often becomes a measure—*real or assumed*—of performance.

- How much time remains:
 - Before the “story” gets out; or
 - Until consequences hit?
- How much time is required:
 - To determine the options and make decisions (*deadlines*);
 - To *implement* a strategy; and
 - For actions to take effect (*lag time*)?

Drama

Drama refers to public visibility of or interest in the crisis and the people or organisation(s) involved. Ask:

- What story are people hearing (the “*narrative*”)?
- Are people in your team “seized” by the drama (*internal attention*)?
- What are the gaps between perception and reality (*accuracy, rumours*)?
- What is the bystander behaviour?
- Is there great suspense (fed by *high stakes & uncertainty*)?

Decisions

Often, a few “big”, fateful decisions must be made by a few, high-level individuals.

- What are the necessary decisions to be made?
- *Clarity* is essential
 - Both in making decisions (chain of command)
 - and in explaining decisions to others
- Process & responsibility is important
 - Beware *groupthink*, have safeguards
- *Creativity* can be helpful

Stakes (Consequences)

The stakes in a crisis are often particularly (and unavoidably) high, and their consequences can extend well beyond the immediate moment. Consider:

- Multi-level: Personal, organisational, perhaps widespread
- Factor in evaluation (severity)
- *Macro-consequences*: wider world
- *Micro-consequences*: affecting next steps in crisis management

Emotions

Emotions often run high in a crisis, which can amplify the drama and stakes, and may intensify with uncertainty.

They can:

- Have their own consequences (emotions take a practical, physical toll)
- Be a potential distraction or resource (positive emotions, such as inspiration, solidarity)
- Demand separate attention
- Require a separate skill set

Uncertainty

It is important to distinguish between “known-unknowns” (things we know we don’t know) and “unknown-unknowns” (things we don’t know that we don’t know). Consider how uncertainty can:

- Change the quality of decision-making under pressure
- Affect emotion, as it increases stress
- Be *tractable* (can certainties be introduced into the situation?)
- Be *subjective* (some know, some don’t) and *relative* (e.g. to expectations, experience)

Perspective

Different actors can perceive the same situation differently. Taking those different perspectives into account can help define the subjective *scope* of the challenge and support consensus in decision-making. Consider:

- Is this a crisis for me/us?
- Are there too few perspectives that can lead to *tunnel vision*?
 - Multiple perspectives always exist (e.g. actors vs. audience)
 - Might be essential for *consensus* when making *decisions*
- Are these perspectives distinct from *denial* or *wishful thinking*?

CREATING A CONCERTED RESPONSE

For each of the elements of Crisis Anatomy, individuals or small teams can be assigned responsibility for identifying and monitoring what is changing. For example, one team can track how much time certain actions will take, and what consequences may arise in that period. Another team can identify the key decisions that will need to be made, and by whom. Meanwhile, another team monitors the critical uncertainties and determines the information that is needed. By working in tandem, teams can build a more complete picture of the crisis while avoiding the paralysis that comes from waiting for one person to process everything. Delegating in this way helps leaders shape a response that is thoughtful and timely without allowing the crisis itself to dictate every action.

BUILDING CRISIS AGILITY

Resilience is not just a capacity. It is a skill set that can be learned, taught, practised and improved over time. The truly resilient are those who are inclined to rise to the challenge when a crisis hits and are capable of acting thoughtfully, purposefully to deal with whatever comes their way. Training in Crisis Diagnosis and seeking opportunities to gain valuable experience in crisis situations (under circumstances that reflect one’s abilities) are the two best ways to build Crisis Agility. That is resilience in practice.^{AMI}



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