



CRISIS LEADERSHIP (RESILIENCE) PREDICTS OVERALL LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract: Robert McKee once noted, “True character is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure - the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character’s essential nature.” The corollary of that axiom is pressure brings out the worst in us, as well as the best in us. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that in four separate analyses spanning 21 years of the world’s most challenging leadership role, i.e., President of the United States, the data supported the conclusion that the best predictor of overall leadership effectiveness was effective crisis leadership. Similarly, the best predictor of poor overall leadership was found to be poor crisis leadership. These findings hold significance for political and corporate governance.

Key Words: crisis leadership; Transformative Resilient Leadership; crisis intervention; crisis management; resilience

INTRODUCTION

It is inevitable that, from time to time, organizations, communities, and even nations find themselves in crisis. It is during times such as these that effective leadership becomes imperative.

“Wanted—A Leader! In every great crisis, the human heart demands a leader that incarnates its ideas, its emotions, and its aims. Till such a leader appears, everything is disorder, disaster, and defeat. The moment he takes the helm, order, promptitude, and confidence follow as the necessary result. When we see such results, we know that a hero leads.”

These words were published on April 25, 1861, in the New York Times. They referred to the fact that on April 13, the South Carolinian militia forced the United States Army garrison at Fort Sumter to surrender. And thus, the American Civil War had begun.

It is the nature of many to search for a hero who will plot a course to safety through the fog of crisis. It is as true now as it was in 1861—as we remember 2020 and 2021 as years that threatened not only our physical health, but also our economic and social viability as a nation. And now we see perhaps the greatest threat to global survival unfold in Eastern Europe with the invasion of the Ukraine and the threat of tactical and strategic nuclear warfare. The American Civil War, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in the Ukraine, to mention only a few examples, continue to teach us the importance of leadership. But what predicts effective leadership?

CURRENT RESEARCH

It has been said a rising tide lifts all boats, weak and strong, but only the most seaworthy can withstand the raging tempest, while the others sink in the roiling and violent seas of turmoil. Simply said, it’s easy to lead when

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things are going well, but true leaders emerge in times of adversity. This echoes the words of Robert McKee who noted, “True character is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure – the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character's essential nature.” The corollary of that axiom is pressure brings out the worst in us, as well as the best in us. Eloquent as these assertions may be, they yield a testable hypothesis.

The decisions we make in crisis are those most likely to yield lasting effects for us personally and for those who depend upon us for guidance. The mistakes we make in crisis are those most likely to last for years, possibly generations.

The position of President of the United States stands emblematic of the importance of high pressure and even crisis leadership. The noted author John Steinbeck once said, “We give the President more work to do than a man can do, more responsibility than a man should take, more pressure than a man can bear.” Arguably, the study of American presidential leadership serves as a virtual proxy for all leadership roles, but especially leadership under stress and adversity.

This investigation is the latest in a series of investigations, both qualitative (Everly, Strouse, & Everly, 2010; Everly, Strouse, & McCormack, 2015; Everly, Wu, Cumpsty-Fowler, Dang, & Potash, 2020; Everly & Athey, 2022), as well as quantitative (Everly, Smith, & Lobo, 2013; Firestone & Everly, 2013; Everly, Everly & Smith, 2020) into resilience and crisis leadership.

Given the aforementioned literary allusions to the importance of actions under pressure, as well as previous qualitative and quantitative research, the current hypothesis was that crisis leadership would be a significant determinant of overall leadership effectiveness.

METHOD

The nonprofit organization C-SPAN has been collecting survey data on presidential leadership effectiveness from historians and leadership scholars for over the course of two decades. Continuing to update their findings, their research has been published in 2000, 2009, 2017, and 2021. C-SPAN's data collection consisted of the following:

“C-SPAN's academic advisors devised a survey in which participants used a one (‘not effective’) to ten (‘very effective’) scale to rate each president on ten qualities of presidential leadership: ‘Public Persuasion,’ ‘Crisis Leadership,’ ‘Economic Management,’ ‘Moral Authority,’ ‘International Relations,’ ‘Administrative Skills,’ ‘Relations with Congress,’ ‘Vision/Setting An Agenda,’ ‘Pursued Equal Justice for All,’ and ‘Performance Within the Context of His Times.’ Surveys were distributed to historians and professional observers of the presidency, drawn from a database of C-SPAN's programming, augmented by suggestions from the academic advisors” (C-SPAN, 2021).

Having obtained the scored data for all surveys, the next step in the current investigation was to amalgamate the data to meaningful units for further analysis. Combining all presidential data across all surveys would result in a needless dilution through an increase in variance and potential regression to the mean effect. Therefore, rather than analyze all presidents, we chose to limit our analyses to the most homogeneously meaningful subsets, using a variation of regression attenuation as rationale. To attenuate the data in this instance, we relied upon the empirical truism that there can be no such thing as validity without reliability. Tests of inter-rater reliability were performed to identify homogenous groups of presidents with regard

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to overall leadership effectiveness and crisis leadership effectiveness.

We then conducted Spearman rho correlational analyses on crisis leadership as a predictor of overall leadership.

RESULTS

The inter-rater reliability was maximized throughout the 2000, 2009, 2017 and 2021 C-SPAN results by limiting the analyses to the presidents who were most reliably ranked for their overall effectiveness across surveys and for whom crises virtually defined their presidencies. Using empirically derived

cutting lines (maximizing reliability), we choose the three presidents rated as most effective overall. Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Franklin D. Roosevelt were the presidents most consistently rated as the most effective. The three presidents consistently rated least effective overall were Franklin Pierce, Andrew Johnson, and James Buchanan.

As can be seen below, Table 1 lists the presidents and their rankings in overall leadership. Inter-rated reliability for the most effective leaders overall was .83, while reliability for the worst leaders overall was 1.0.

Table 1:

Best and worst overall leaders

President	Overall Leadership Rankings			
	2021	2017	2009	2000
<u>Abraham Lincoln</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>George Washington</u>	2	2	2	3
<u>Franklin D. Roosevelt</u>	3	3	3	2
Inter-rater reliability .83				
<u>Franklin Pierce</u>	42 (3)	41 (3)	40 (3)	39 (3)
<u>Andrew Johnson</u>	43 (2)	42 (2)	41(2)	40 (2)
<u>James Buchanan</u>	44 (1)	43 (1)	42(1)	41 (1)
Inter-rater reliability 1.0				

Table 2 below lists the presidents and their rankings in crisis leadership. Inter-rater reliability for the most effective crisis leaders

was .83 while reliability for the worst crisis leaders was .66.

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Table 2:

Best and worst crisis leaders

President	Crisis Leadership Category Rankings			
	2021	2017	2009	2000
<u>Abraham Lincoln</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>George Washington</u>	2	2	2	3
<u>Franklin D. Roosevelt</u>	3	3	3	2
Inter-rater reliability .83				
<u>Franklin Pierce</u>	42 (3)	41 (3)	41 (2)	40 (2)
<u>Andrew Johnson</u>	43 (2)	42 (2)	40 (3)	37 (5)
<u>James Buchanan</u>	44 (1)	43 (1)	42 (1)	41 (1)
874	Inter-rater reliability .66			

Crisis leadership proved to a “perfect” predictor of overall leadership effectiveness with those rated the most effective presidents in American history (correlations 1.0). While crisis leadership predicted overall leadership with correlations ranging from .94 to 1.0 amongst the worst rated presidents.

Table 3 provides the previously identified best and worst crisis presidents, their respective crisis and overall leadership ranking, and related coefficients of correlation using crisis leadership as a predictor of overall leadership.

Table 3:

Crisis leadership as a predictor of overall leadership

Crisis Ranking /	Overall Leadership Rankings			
	2021	2017	2009	2000
<u>Abraham Lincoln</u>	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1
<u>George Washington</u>	2/2	2/2	2/2	3/3
<u>Franklin D. Roosevelt</u>	3/3	3/3	3/3	2/2
Crisis: Overall Rho	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
<u>Franklin Pierce</u>	42 (3/3)	41 (3/3)	40 3/(3)	39 (2/3)
<u>Andrew Johnson</u>	43 (2/2)	42 (2/2)	413/(2)	40 (5/2)
<u>James Buchanan</u>	44 (1/1)	43 (1/1)	42(1/1)	41 (1/1)
Crisis: Overall Rho	1.0	1.0	.94	.94

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DISCUSSION

Analyses of the data reveal the most effective presidential leaders in crisis were also the most effective leaders overall. Thus, crisis leadership was shown to be an “almost perfect” predictor of overall leadership amongst highly effective and highly ineffective presidents. Each of the most effective presidents led through the fog of crisis ultimately to unify diverse peoples and create a community that was stronger than before. This notion we may refer to as “transformative resilient leadership.” Simply said, these are leaders who not only navigate the challenges of crisis but use it as an opportunity for growth. They buffer those they lead against adversity, they facilitate rebound, and they leap forward to growth. George Washington’s transformative leadership contributed to the creation of a new nation. Abraham Lincoln saved that nation and set into motion actions that would allow the nation to become perhaps the most influential nation in the history of humankind. Finally, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s policies saved the nation twice. Once from a paralyzing financial crisis in 1933 by setting into motion policies that continue even today to provide financial stability, support, and growth for its people. And once again from the threats of megalomaniacal foreign dictators in the 1940s.

The least effective presidents, on the other hand, were those who, when faced with a crisis, hesitated or simply could not act decisively. Perhaps they experienced conflict between the needs of the moment versus the greater good. They seemed to lack vision as well when compared to the most effective presidents who were all visionaries. Pierce was rated poorly because of his decision to give greater priority to expanding national borders as opposed to addressing the growing ideological and economic schism between states, in addition to his advocacy for slavery

in the late 1850s. Andrew Johnson struggled with reconciliation after the Civil War and was the first American president to be impeached. Finally, James Buchanan was rated poorly because of his complacency in the wake of the Pierce presidency which historians believed contributed to the Civil War.

The findings of this investigation may hold significant implications for political and corporate governance domestically and internationally. If we are guided by the axiom: “True character is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure,” then we are provided insight into a leader’s overall competency by examining their performance under pressure. Rather than being influenced by their ability to maintain a productive course when times are good (the rising tide), perhaps we should be more influenced by their ability to provide safety and even prosperity when times are bad (withstand the raging tempest). Based on previous analyses (Everly, Smith, & Lobo, 2013; Everly, Everly, & Smith, 2020; Everly & Athey, 2022), those who are guided by a vision are decisive and understand the power of collaboration and mutual support will be the most effective leaders in both good times and bad.

While there are myriad of trainings and university classes on leadership, there are relatively few such programs on the unique challenges and predictors of effective resilience-focused crisis leadership. Subsequent analyses of how corporate and governmental leaders (both local and Federal) approach crises such as reconciliation of political-societal polarization, management of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of media credibility, economic management of the highest inflation rate in 40 years, failing educational systems, responses to rising urban crime, and management of international affairs at a most

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challenging point in history, will tell us much about those who lead. Perhaps data such as these can assist leaders in making better decisions.

LIMITATIONS

Statistically speaking, the present study is correlational, thus causality cannot be assumed. In such instances, historical qualitative analyses may yield further insight into causality.

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