



Before I begin with a sketch of my own recent observation of leadership in a crisis, I want to borrow a framework from the fourth-century Athenian author, Xenophon, which will both help me understand what we mean when we call something a “crisis” and also help illustrate the kind of crisis of leadership I have in mind.

At *Cyropaedia* 1.6.21 Xenophon relates a fictionalized dialogue between Cambyses, the king of Persia, and his son, Cyrus, who will become the first king of the Persian Empire. The topic under discussion is the difference between obedience and *willing* obedience. The former behavior, it is acknowledged, may be cultivated through rewards and punishments: give prizes and honors to those who obey and impose some penalty on those who don’t. Insofar as willing obedience is preferable, however, Cambyses explains that the carrot and stick method will not work. Instead, the person in the leadership role must appear more *phronimos* (=wise, sensible, prudent) on behalf of the interests of their followers than the followers themselves are. And lest we conclude that seeming *phronimos* is merely performative, Cambyses insists that one cannot seem to be *phronimos* without actually *being phronimos*. Given our familiarity with the manipulative powers of mass media and the vertiginous hierarchies of power we operate in, Cambyses’ assertion that you can’t fake a reputation for wisdom seems naive. Yet he is operating in a much smaller, more tight-knit Persian community, where clear tests of character are regularly applied.

To illustrate his claim that a reputation for being *phronimos* in the interests of others fosters willing obedience, Cambyses offers three scenarios, each of which helps us understand what leadership in a crisis might look like:

- 1) The physician in time of illness

- 2) The captain of a ship during a storm
- 3) The guide when we have lost our way

A moment's reflection here will reveal how Cambyses' examples resonate even today. We will allow a doctor to poke us with needles, put us under anesthesia, and even cut us open to remove parts of us and even put foreign parts in, so long as we believe they know what is in our best interest. The same is true for guides and captains. We will eagerly follow and endure hardship if we think they know what they are doing.

Each of these scenarios is a crisis in the sense that they depict an imminent threat to the regular way of doing things, e.g., illness, physical danger, being lost. These threats are also ones that require expertise, decisiveness, and action. But these behaviors elicit willing obedience only if those in the leadership role seem *phronimos*. It is perhaps worth reflecting here on the effectiveness of the American response to the Coronavirus in terms of our respect--or not--for science and the reputation of our leadership for being *phronimos*--or not.

I now come to my own recent observation of leadership in a crisis. On the night of January 27, I attended the opening night of *Spring Awakening* at the RoundHouse Theatre in Bethesda with Richard Giarusso. As the play is a musical, the opening scene contained a number involving the whole cast running around the stage and moving on and off a rotating platform in the center. About halfway into the song one of the actors landed on the trap door on the front of the stage and completely destroyed it. All of the actors proceeded to finish the scene as though nothing had happened, even though the actor who had been at "ground zero" was now visibly bleeding from his calf. The audience whispered to itself trying to make sense of the calamity. I happened to be sitting next to the assistant director, who insisted that the accident was completely unexpected because the trap door had already been put through so much during rehearsals.

What to do now that the scene was over? This was opening night after all. The theater's board members, their biggest donors, and many critics as well as

politicians and local celebrities were in attendance. Would what happened be processed as a fluke or as mismanagement, amateurishness, or even gross incompetence? Would someone need to take the blame? And more to the moment: would the illusion of theater be lost for the night, having been interrupted so early on?

As the audience was whispering to each other in confused and concerned tones, no doubt pondering such questions as these, the house lights came on, and the artistic director, Ryan Rilette, emerged from his seat to tell everyone that the play would be halted for a considerable amount of time while the trap door was fixed. I remember it taking at least fifteen minutes. Ryan did not make any excuse nor did he try to make light of what had happened. He was, as I have observed him to be for the past several years, earnest, down-to-earth, and sensitive to the emotional needs of others in the room. Within a matter of seconds the mood shifted from one of confusion and concern to one of relief and almost self-congratulation to have been a part of such a strange occurrence.

I don't think this fully captures the leadership in a crisis on this occasion, however. For I don't believe Ryan's short speech would have been so reassuring to everyone had the theater not spent so much time in the community, building a reputation for being *phronimos* in its interests--like a physician, captain, or guide. I can't speak to Ryan's role in doing this (though I'm sure it is significant) as well as I can to that of the managing director, Ed Zakreski. I have known Ed for almost fifteen years, since he was the chief development officer at the Shakespeare Theatre Company and then when he came to RoundHouse. The first things I noticed about Ed when I met him years ago at another opening night were his firm handshake, gentle voice, and his ability to hold eye contact in a way that signaled genuine interest without scrutiny or judgment. Ed gets to know people; he does not size them up. Ed can also read a room better than Chinese facial recognition software. He knows who has arrived, whom they are with, whom they are waiting for, and what their present mood is relative to their general personality. Behind the scenes he is on the phone or in meetings with people all the time, building bridges and mending fences. In whatever social or professional

setting he's in, he is working hard to make everyone feel heard and included. He has a phenomenal memory for personal details and the social networks of others, such that he can make a newbie to the community feel like a lifetime member in a matter of moments.

The result of reputation for being *phronimos* that Ed and others in the theater have cultivated is that when something goes wrong, it does not feel like it happened to the theater; it feels like it happened to all of us. And we thus look not to cast blame but to feel sympathy for anyone affected.

For me, then, leadership *before* a crisis is as relevant as the performance of calm or the resourceful thinking that hopefully goes on *during* a crisis. I take this sketch as a challenge to myself to continually ask, "*what can I do to play the physician, captain, and guide in the interest of my communities and build my reputation for doing so?*"

Finally, I should point out this paradox: as crucial as it is, leadership in a crisis might never be noticed or even well-remembered. How many of us can remember having revealing conversations with our parents, as adults, about a time when we were kids and not everything was as normal as it seemed? Though someone was sicker than they let on, money was tighter than the holiday presents would suggest, or someone lost their job and wasn't sure where the next one would come from, still everything somehow turned out o.k. The same was true of the opening night of *Spring Awakening*. As Richard and I left the theater, I don't remember us talking about anything other than how good the music was, and then the acting. We weren't avoiding the curious incident of the trap door out of any sense of decor or pity; it just didn't seem relevant. The magic of the performance had not been lost after all. When Ed and I had lunch a few weeks later, all we talked about was how far ahead of its time this initially-Victorian play had been. Indeed, if I had not challenged myself to recall an instance of leadership in a crisis, I don't believe I would have thought of this moment ever again.

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