

Three Habits You Must Master During Crises

By Henry S. Givray
April 6, 2020



Two companies I served as CEO faced three high-stakes external crises – the dot-com crash, 9/11 and the 2008/2009 Great Recession. While leading one of those companies, I also had to personally confront a heart-wrenching internal crisis that at times brought me to my knees: My late wife’s 18-month arduous and merciless battle with acute myeloid leukemia. To help me be my best for her and my family during this internal crisis, and for my colleagues, clients, boards and shareholders during the external ones, I looked to the true meaning of leadership for inspiration and guidance. The following three principles are drawn from my many years of continuous leadership learning and personal growth. By activating these principles consciously and with intention, and turning them into habits, you will expand your capacity to do more. You will be more effective, more productive and make greater impacts – when, how and where most needed.



Note that these habits are relevant and applicable for anyone in a position of authority, responsibility or influence including heads of organizations, parents, healthcare professionals, politicians, government officials, teachers and of course managers and supervisors at all levels.

1. Self-manage unproductive thoughts and emotions

During difficult, trying times, it’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking that conditions are worse than they are. We tend to agonize about what could happen, fear the unknown, inflate bad news, doubt if we are up to the task, question past decisions, wonder if we’ll make it, embrace unsubstantiated doom and gloom sources, and feel helpless. After all, we are all human.

But are such thoughts and emotions productive? Do they help us deliver our best in support of others and produce desired outcomes? It’s true that for some, worrying is what’s needed to better prepare and act. But excessive, irrational and ongoing worry or panic will drain you – mentally, emotionally and physically. As a result, you will become detached, inaccessible, paralyzed or worse. And

when that happens, you are no good to yourself and certainly no good to others who rely on you.

So how do you mitigate and ultimately neutralize such natural human reactions during scary, unsettling times? By excelling at self-management. That means you regulate, adjust and control what you are thinking and feeling in order to reduce stress and anxiety, in yourself and in others. Doing so allows you to remain clear-headed, mentally agile, emotionally resilient and fully present.

Successful self-management can be hard – really hard. It requires conscious intention, discipline and continual honing of both self-awareness and skills. Start by focusing on and paying

attention to the things you can control and not on those you can’t. For example, when it comes to COVID-19, you can’t control government responses, disease severity and reach, treatment or vaccine availability and efficacy, or financial market swings. Nor can you control how others interpret or respond to information and events. But you can control your thinking, beliefs, emotions, reactions, behaviors and actions. Note, however, that you shouldn’t ignore or dismiss your worries and fears. Instead, be deliberate and steadfast in recognizing and acknowledging them. But soon after that, eject them from your psyche with determination and diligence. Then center your focus on the present and the tasks at hand.

It’s also vital to recognize that growth comes not only from adding something such as new knowledge, skills, insights or capabilities. As importantly, it also is achieved by shedding – getting rid of preconceived notions, emotions, presumptions, self-doubts and negative thoughts that can inhibit or block the additive type of growth.

Another approach is to think clearly and comprehensively about a desired future outcome first, and then work backwards to know what’s required from you to produce it. You will see more clearly what you must regulate, adjust and control in yourself to ensure you don’t inhibit or derail that outcome.



Finally, **just do it**. This may sound simplistic and perhaps unhelpful. But I've come to know and have experienced that as human beings we all possess the will and capacity for self-determination. Victor Frankl says it best in his renowned 1946 book, **Man's Search for Meaning**: "A human being is not one thing among others; *things* determine each other, but *man* is ultimately self-determining."

2. Focus on the things that only you can do

A former client and valued mentor gave me some advice when I was in my early thirties that has had a profound effect on my thinking in all areas of life. He said to have the greatest impact on others, as well as achieve enduring success, you must focus on the things that only you can do as defined by your role, responsibilities, obligations and particular skills or unique circumstances – both professionally and personally.

During the external crises, there were things that only I as CEO could and had to do including determining how to formulate messages and frame key actions for all audiences; providing direction and support to my management team; communicating directly to all employees, clients, board members and shareholders with clarity and credibility; making tough and often difficult judgment calls and decisions; and, ensuring that as a company we stayed true to our chosen values. During my late wife's illness, I was the only one who could be her husband and life-partner. For me, that meant many things including holding her hand before medical procedures and being there with a smile and hug afterward, being present and listening intently during medical team consults, and providing regular, ongoing emotional and physical comfort and relief.

No doubt there are things you can do better or more efficiently than others. You may even enjoy and prefer doing them. But your most important and meaningful impact on the people and organizations you serve must start with the things that only you can do. If not you, who? That's why you must never delegate, defer or dismiss the things that only you can do. You must prioritize them above all else, and make certain you have the time, energy and heart to do them.

3. Replenish your energy

Time is finite. We all have exactly 24 hours in a day. We can't alter, manipulate or recover time. We can, however, learn how best to use and navigate through time by prioritizing, delegating, accepting 80 percent on some tasks to ensure 100 percent on essential ones, and of course focusing on the things that only we can do. The countless time-management ideas and tools out there can help.

It's vital, however, to realize that although time is a finite resource, energy can be expanded and regularly renewed. Instead of fretting over time, you should instead concentrate on energy. When, where or under what circumstances do you personally get replenished

or refreshed? The key is to know the type of energy you need, whether it is physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, or a combination thereof. Then identify your sources of needed energy which could be a place of beauty and serenity, physical exercise, quiet moments of reflection, a type of music, joyous memories, family time, conversation with a special someone, or a specific set of activities. Most importantly, tap into your sources of energy with discipline and relentless commitment not only when needed but also in preparation of what is ahead.

One of my sources of energy is watching movies in my theater room. Experiencing the escapism of movies while enveloped in sound and visual magic relaxes me, quiets my mind and reduces my tension. Working on the leadership learning programs I created and facilitate gives me energy and renews me mentally and emotionally. I knew how important it was for me to continue my work with these programs not in spite of some of the most trying times dealing with my late wife's illness, but rather precisely because of them.

During this demanding and unpredictable period, the weight of your responsibilities, expanding "to-do" list and ever-changing demands for your attention can be exhausting and difficult to switch off. To stave off being overwhelmed and depleted, know and access your sources of energy, every day and without compromise.

Each time we are on an airplane and about to takeoff, we are given an important instruction: In case of a cabin pressure emergency, put on your own mask first before assisting others. This simple concept is even truer during prolonged periods of uncertainty and adversity. You can't help others for very long or with consistent effectiveness if you don't take care of yourself first. By adopting the three habits above and making them stick, you can maximize your efforts and remove barriers that may be preventing you from achieving peak performance. As a result, you will expand your capacity and create more opportunities to make decisions and take actions that are both timely and most meaningful in support and care of the people and organization(s) you serve.

Henry S. Givray is former Chairman, President & CEO of Smithbucklin Corporation, the world's largest association management and services company. He served as President & CEO from 2002 to 2015 and Chairman of the Board (non-executive) from 2016 to 2020. Henry is a dedicated, ongoing student of leadership, committed to speaking and writing as a way to teach and give back. His insights and ideas on leadership have been prominently featured in business books and national news media, and he has been invited to speak at numerous association conferences, corporate meetings, and educational forums. One of Henry's most enduring achievements has been his creation of comprehensive, high-impact leadership learning programs. The programming has evolved to include two offerings under the brand Leadership's Calling®. The Diverse Cohort Program is for CEOs and other C-suite executives, vice presidents, directors and managers at all levels, business owners, entrepreneurs, individual practitioners, and high-potentials from all types and sizes of organizations representing varied industries and professions. The second offering is an exclusive program for a CEO (or head of an organization) and members of his or her senior management team, participating together.