Executive Presence in a Crisis

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The moment presence is judged most

Ordinary, low-stakes moments rarely reveal much about a leader's real presence. A genuine crisis, a major failure, an unexpected loss, a public setback, does, because it strips away preparation time and forces a leader to respond in real time, under real pressure, with real consequences. How a leader shows up in these moments is often remembered far longer than almost anything else they do.

What steady crisis leadership actually looks like

Visible calm, not suppressed feeling. Teams do not need a leader who feels nothing during a crisis; they need a leader who can acknowledge the gravity of the situation honestly while remaining functional and clear-headed. Pretending everything is fine when it visibly is not tends to undermine trust rather than build it.

Clarity about what is known, unknown, and being done. In the early hours of a crisis, information is often incomplete. Leaders who communicate clearly about this, "here is what we know, here is what we don't yet, and here is what we are doing to find out," build far more confidence than those who either overstate certainty or go silent until they have a complete picture.

Decisive action on what can be decided now. Crises often involve some decisions that must be made immediately with incomplete information, and others that can genuinely wait for more information. Leaders who can distinguish between the two, acting decisively on the former while resisting the pressure to prematurely decide the latter, tend to navigate crises more effectively.

Attention to the human impact, not only the operational one. Crises affect people, sometimes significantly. Leaders who address only the operational or reputational dimension, without acknowledging the human cost to those affected, often damage trust even while technically managing the crisis competently.

Why preparation matters more than instinct

Very few leaders are naturally, instinctively composed in a genuine crisis the first time they face one. What looks like natural composure in experienced crisis leaders is usually the result of having thought through, in advance, how they want to show up under pressure, and having built the specific practices, a physical reset, a communication structure, a trusted small circle to consult, that make that composure achievable in the moment.

Building this capability before it is needed

Reflecting honestly on how you have handled past high-pressure moments, what worked, what you would do differently, and rehearsing, even informally, how you would want to communicate in a plausible future crisis specific to your role, builds real readiness. This is difficult, valuable work to do with a coach, since it requires an honesty about your own patterns that is hard to generate

entirely alone.