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CASE COMMENTARY

Leadership in Times of Crisis: Case Studies and Best Practices

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I. Introduction

Crisis tests leadership in ways that routine administration never does. When information is incomplete, stakes are high, and time is short, the quality of decision-making at the top determines whether an organisation or indeed a nation emerges intact or unravels. The Johnson & Johnson Tylenol poisonings in 1982, the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel staff's reaction to the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's leadership during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and Boeing's poor leadership during the 737 MAX issue. It situates these episodes within the academic literature on crisis management, particularly the influential five-stage competency model developed by Wooten and James, before distilling best practices of contemporary relevance to organisations, public institutions, and individual leaders alike.

II. The Theoretical Frame: Crisis as a Leadership Test

Management scholars Lynn Perry Wooten and Erika James define a crisis as a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens organisational viability and is marked by causal ambiguity and the need for rapid decision-making¹. Building on Ian Mitroff's earlier five-phase model of crisis management signal detection, probing and prevention, damage containment, business

¹Lynn Perry Wooten & Erika Hayes James, "Linking Crisis Management and Leadership Competencies: The Role of Human Resource Development," *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2008); see also "The Prepared Leader: The Five Phases of Crisis Management," Knowledge at Wharton, University of Pennsylvania.

recovery, and learning and reflection². Wooten and James mapped distinct leadership competencies onto each phase, arguing that sense-making and perspective-taking are indispensable during signal detection, while decisiveness, communication, and risk-taking dominate the containment and recovery phases³. This framework is analytically useful because it discourages the popular but reductive view that crisis leadership is a single dramatic act performed in a moment of danger. Instead, it treats leadership as a sequence of context-specific judgments extending from the earliest warning signs to the post-crisis institutional audit — a sequence against which each of the case studies below may be measured.

III. Case Studies

A. Johnson & Johnson: The Tylenol Poisonings (1982)

In September 1982, seven people in the Chicago area died after ingesting Extra-Strength Tylenol capsules that had been laced with potassium cyanide⁴. At the time, Tylenol was Johnson & Johnson's most lucrative product line, accounting for almost a quarter of the company's profit⁵. Chief Executive James Burke made two decisions that remain a staple of business-school pedagogy: first, an immediate and entirely voluntary nationwide recall of some thirty-one million bottles at a cost of approximately US\$100 million, notwithstanding the absence of any legal obligation to do so⁶; and second, sustained candour with the press and public, including the establishment of a toll-free hotline for anxious consumers⁷. Commentators have since described this conduct as a template that deliberately avoided the defensiveness that deepened public alarm during the Three-Mile Island nuclear incident⁸. Within roughly a year, Tylenol had reclaimed its position as the market-leading analgesic in the United States⁹. The episode demonstrates that a leader who protects the public interest,

²Ian I. Mitroff, "Crisis Management and Environmentalism: A Natural Fit," *California Management Review* (1988); Ian I. Mitroff & Christine M. Pearson, *Crisis Management: A Diagnostic Guide for Improving Your Organization's Crisis-Preparedness* (Jossey-Bass, 1993).

³James + Wooten, "Learning Before, During, and After Crisis," jamesandwooten.com (accessed July 2026).

⁴"Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol Crisis: A Lesson in Ethical Crisis Management," Journalism University (2026); Josh Sanburn, "The Tylenol Murders: How Poisoned Medicine Became a Model Crisis," *TIME* (Sept. 2014).

⁵"Crisis Communication Strategies: Case Study – The Johnson & Johnson Tylenol Crisis," Department of Communication, University of Oklahoma.

⁶Knowledge at Wharton, "Tylenol and the Legacy of J&J's James Burke," University of Pennsylvania (Oct. 2012).

⁷"The Tylenol Case Study: A Masterclass in Crisis Communications," PR & Lattes (2023).

⁸"Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol Crisis: A Lesson in Ethical Crisis Management," Journalism University (2026), citing contemporaneous Washington Post commentary contrasting J&J's response with Three-Mile Island.

⁹"The Crucial Role of Empathy in Crisis Management," Phillips Kaiser (Nov. 2023).

even at direct and quantifiable short-term cost to the organisation, frequently protects the organisation's long-term interest as well.

B. The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel and the 26/11 Attacks (2008)

When ten terrorists struck five sites across Mumbai on 26 November 2008, the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel became the most prolonged and visible theatre of the fifty-nine-hour siege that followed¹⁰. What subsequently drew the attention of Harvard Business School, which produced the multimedia case 'Terror at the Taj Bombay: Customer-Centric Leadership,' was not the conduct of senior management alone but the extraordinary behaviour of rank-and-file staff, many of whom remained at their posts to guide guests to safety at the cost of their own lives¹¹. The hotel's General Manager, Karambir Kang, continued to supervise the evacuation even as he learned that his wife and son, trapped on an upper floor, would not survive¹². Tata Sons Chairman Ratan Tata remained at the site for the duration of the operation, a visible presence beside emergency personnel and grieving families¹³. Researchers have attributed the staff's conduct to a deeply embedded culture of customer-centricity cultivated over decades what the case describes as India's 'guest is God' ethic suggesting that crisis leadership is not manufactured in the moment but is the visible expression of values instilled long before the crisis begins¹⁴.

C. Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine

When Russian forces advanced on Kyiv in February 2022, the United States reportedly offered to evacuate President Zelenskyy from the capital. His refusal "The fight is here, I need ammunition, not a ride" has since been confirmed by Zelenskyy himself and became a rallying point for Ukrainian resistance¹⁵. Analysts have noted that his subsequent practice of near-daily video addresses filmed from the streets of Kyiv, rather than from a secure location, authenticated his message and contrasted sharply with the more remote and defensive posture

¹⁰Harvard Business School, Working Knowledge, "Terror at the Taj" (on Rohit Deshpandé, "Terror at the Taj Bombay: Customer-Centric Leadership").

¹¹Ibid.

¹²"Mumbai Terror Attacks: Remembering the Heroes of 26/11," Deccan Herald.

¹³"Ratan Tata Ensured That Victims of 26/11 Were Honoured," Deccan Herald.

¹⁴Harvard Business School, Working Knowledge, "Terror at the Taj"; "Response by Taj Employees to 26/11 a Case Study at Harvard," Business Standard.

¹⁵Ben Tracy, "Zelenskyy Confirmed Asking for 'Ammunition, Not a Ride.' Four Years Ago, I Got Pushback for Reporting That," CBS News (2026); Wikipedia, "I need ammunition, not a ride."

projected by Russian President Vladimir Putin¹⁶. According to a Harvard Kennedy School reflection, this six-word statement "riveted the world's attention on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and galvanised his country"¹⁷. Scholarship applying Bernard Bass's transformational leadership framework to Zelenskyy's wartime conduct concludes that his effectiveness rests on the combination of a clear moral mission, visible personal risk-sharing, and consistent, high-frequency communication¹⁸. The case illustrates the disproportionate symbolic weight that a leader's physical presence and personal choices carry during existential crises.

D. Boeing and the 737 MAX Crisis: A Cautionary Contrast

Between October 2018 and March 2019, two crashes of the Boeing 737 MAX killed 346 people, leading to a worldwide grounding of the aircraft¹⁹. Unlike the preceding examples, the Boeing episode illustrates the cost of deficient leadership. Chief Executive Dennis Muilenburg was widely criticised for a belated and inconsistent public response and for the company's reluctance to accept institutional responsibility in the aftermath of the first crash²⁰. Subsequent investigation revealed that internal concerns regarding the aircraft's flight-control software had not been adequately escalated to regulators or communicated to pilots²¹, pointing to an organisational culture in which cost and schedule pressures had progressively crowded out engineering caution²². Boeing's board removed Muilenburg as Chief Executive in December 2019, stating that "a change in leadership was necessary to restore confidence in the company" among regulators, customers, and other stakeholders²³. Subsequent academic analysis attributes the resulting multi-billion-dollar losses and large-scale job cuts substantially to this leadership failure rather than to the technical defect in isolation²⁴. The case is instructive precisely because it demonstrates that the absence of the qualities visible in the preceding cases

¹⁶"How President Zelenskyy's Wartime Leadership Has Transformed His Image," NPR (Mar. 3, 2022) (interview with Emily Harding, Center for Strategic and International Studies).

¹⁷Dana Born, "Setting New Standards of Leadership," Harvard Kennedy School: Lessons from a Year of War in Ukraine (Feb. 21, 2023).

¹⁸"From Comedian to Commander: The Evolution of Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Leadership," Simply Put Psych, citing a 2023 study in *Politeja* applying Bernard Bass's transformational leadership framework.

¹⁹"Boeing: The 737 MAX Crisis," The Case Centre, Reference No. 320-0129-1.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹"Boeing 737 MAX: Company Culture and Product Failure – Case Study Analysis," Fernfort University (2025).

²²Akshat Singh Bisht, "Why Boeing Failed: Case Study on Management Failures" (2024).

²³"Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg Is Out Over 737 Max Crisis," Al Jazeera (Dec. 23, 2019).

²⁴Subhendu Bhattacharya & Y. Nisha, "A Case Study on Boeing's 737 MAX Crisis on Account of Leadership Failure," Amity Global Business School, Mumbai (2020).

candour, timeliness, and a willingness to absorb short-term cost can convert a technical failure into an existential one.

IV. Best Practices Distilled

First, **speed and transparency outperformed denial and delay**: Zelenskyy's early, visible communication and Johnson & Johnson's quick recall boosted public trust because they anticipated rather than complied with public pressure, while Boeing's slowness made the damage it attempted to contain worse.

Second, **decisive leaders absorb measurable short-term cost to preserve a longer-term interest**: Burke's voluntary US\$100 million recall and Zelenskyy's refusal of evacuation both demonstrate a willingness to accept immediate, quantifiable loss — financial in one case, personal-safety in the other — in service of institutional or national survival.

Third, **crisis behaviour is often the outward manifestation of a culture that was established long before the crisis**: Taj employees' behaviour, which is mostly unplanned and incomprehensible even to their own senior managers, indicates that institutional values and leadership development serve as a kind of crisis preparedness in and of themselves, long before any particular threat materialises.

Fourth, **presence and empathy matter as much as strategy**: Ratan Tata's physical presence outside the besieged hotel and Zelenskyy's street-level broadcasts both signalled shared risk rather than command issued from a safe distance, reinforcing the perceived legitimacy of each leader's subsequent decisions.

Fifth, **crisis leadership does not end with containment**: the Wooten-James framework's final 'learning and reflection' phase is visible in Tylenol's post-crisis introduction of tamper-evident packaging, a change that reshaped an entire industry's manufacturing standards and converted

a survived crisis into a lasting institutional safeguard²⁵. By contrast, the absence of an equivalent structural reckoning at Boeing in the crisis's early phase prolonged rather than resolved the loss of stakeholder confidence.

V. Conclusion

No single trait defines crisis leadership; rather, it is a composite of preparedness, candour, timely and costly decisiveness, and an institutional culture capable of producing the right conduct without waiting for instructions from the top. The four cases examined above spanning American corporate practice, the Indian hospitality sector, wartime statecraft, and global aerospace manufacturing confirm that the underlying grammar of effective crisis response remains remarkably consistent across sector and geography, even as its outward form varies with context. The Boeing episode confirms the converse: the same grammar, inverted, is capable of transforming a survivable technical failure into a leadership catastrophe. For institutions and future leaders alike, the enduring lesson is that a crisis is not merely a test administered without notice; it is best met by those who, in Wooten and James's language, have already begun preparing for it long before it arrives.

²⁵Knowledge at Wharton, "Tylenol and the Legacy of J&J's James Burke" (noting relaunch of Tylenol in tamper-proof packaging two months after the recall).

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