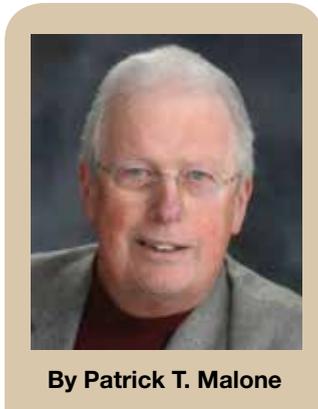


Leadership in Crisis Management

Earn your customer's trust by how you handle a crisis

No matter how well you plan and manage your territory, distribution reps will occasionally be required to respond to and manage a crisis that occurred outside of your control. Your customers, who are the ones being impacted, don't really care that you didn't cause the crisis. They are looking for someone to help them and are giving you a golden opportunity to become someone other than simply another distribution rep. They are looking to you for leadership.



By Patrick T. Malone

Equally bad is responding in the wrong way, as was the case with the BP oil spill. Consider President Obama's reaction to complaints about the federal government's perceived lack of urgency.

"Those who think we were either slow on the response or lacked urgency, don't know the facts. This has been our highest priority."

It is amazing that someone considered to be an excellent communicator was so inept during the oil spill crisis in the Gulf.

No one likes to be told they don't have all the facts. However, most would be open to additional facts if their original point of view was respected and taken seriously.

How you react will have a greater impact on them than the actual solution to the crisis. Let me use two national crises to illustrate this point. While we seem to have a number of crises, the two most apolitical were the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill.

Lessons from the headlines

In the Katrina crisis, President Bush was seen as totally unresponsive and as a result took most of the flak in spite of later investigations placing at least equal responsibility on the Mayor of New Orleans and the Governor of Louisiana. So, assuming that others are managing the issue and doing nothing in a time of crisis is a bad strategy.

President Obama was swept into office by his ability to reach out and touch people in such a personal way. And yet in that one sentence, President Obama denied those people the right to their own point of view and, worse yet, was disrespectful to them at a time he was attempting to influence a change in their point of view. The consequence of this approach was that every one of those people continued to believe the government's response was both slow and lacked urgency – and that belief was even stronger.

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was not the case here and everything the president said, after he implied those people were stupid, fell on deaf ears.

On the other hand, if the President had simply said, *“I know that some believe the federal government’s response was too slow and lacked urgency. I expect that in some cases that criticism might be justified. I have been frustrated at times and that is why this crisis has been our highest priority.”*

He would have acknowledged their point of view without agreeing, proved that he was taking them seriously and most importantly been able to make the case for changing their perspective of the government’s response.

The proper response

So the lessons for current and aspiring leaders in government, business, the community or distribution reps are:

1. Leaders must acknowledge other points of view FIRST (that’s why it’s called leadership).

Leaders are confident enough in their own point of view to initially suspend that point of view and acknowledge that others do not see the situation the same way. That sends a powerful message – that you respect others’ right to their own point of view at this moment in time and that creates an openness that will make them more receptive to your point of view at the appropriate time. No one likes to be told they are wrong, even by the President of the United States, who many see as the most powerful person in the world.

2. Acknowledging another point of view does not mean agreeing with it. It’s simply saying to others (your potential followers) that you respect their right to a different point of view at this moment in time.

This is truly the litmus test of a leader’s confidence. Do you have a strong enough belief in your own point of view that you can acknowledge another point of view without agreeing and compromising your point? Much of the breakdown in today’s discourse, political and otherwise, is due to the inability to acknowledge any other point of view other than our own. We may continue to

disagree but we certainly do not have to be disagreeable in the process.

3. Acknowledging and doing business from other points of view is the precursor to explaining the facts and influencing the conversation to different, more motivated points of view.

Unless others are at neutral or higher, your facts will not get a fair hearing and that is why the strategy of “if I can prove my point, will you drop yours” never works. You may get surrender or compliance or even worse apathy, and none of those endgames will produce the results that you or others desire.

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Effective leadership is the ability to gain willing followers to a common course of action. You may lead, but it will not be effective unless you are able to acknowledge other points of view that are different than your own at any moment in the conversation.

In times of crisis most people will react in one of four ways:

- “Woe is me” (Complain)
- “This is really risky” (Avoid)
- “This is unacceptable” (Stop)
- “What are you going to do about this” (Challenge)

So in preparation for the next crisis, anticipate how you would acknowledge each of those points of view in order to do business with others experiencing those reactions and ultimately lead them to higher, more motivated, points of view. Effective crisis management is a critical step in moving from just another distributor rep to a leader with trusted advisor status. ■