

Salon Series on Leadership in Times of Crisis

Carol O'Connell '69, Fran Engoron '70 and
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LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF CRISIS: A SERIES OF ESSAYS

Introduction



(Image description: 14 of the first 24 women to enroll at William & Mary in 1918)¹

The entry of women into William & Mary in 1918 was born from two crises: World War I and the Spanish Flu pandemic. The College's very survival was based on replacing the men lost in these two tragedies with a new flow of students, so the College reluctantly admitted women for the first time. And because of the pandemic, after a single day of classes, the women were quarantined from the men which had two positive results: the women bonded among themselves and the men grew increasingly curious about their new classmates. As they say, the rest is history!

This anthology or series of essays addresses key aspects of Leadership in Times of Crisis. Each essay can be read as a stand-alone piece but we also encourage reading all of these short pieces to gain more insight. We have endeavored to provide examples, including outstanding women leaders who have exhibited exemplary leadership. And since W&M has a long tradition of strong women and women leaders, we have chosen to end the series with an essay about the current pandemic crisis and how President Katherine Rowe and her team have demonstrated their leadership skills at this critical time in the College's history. We have also included the early response of President Rowe to the late May and early June social and racial justice crisis.

In our research, we uncovered a few interesting observations specific to women and crisis leadership. The first was a recent discussion by Madeleine Albright on why she believes women are so adept at leading in crisis, based on their life experiences as women. Secretary Albright cites the following: women leaders are very good at multi-tasking, decisiveness, learning and adapting, telling hard truths, and have the relational skills to manage and influence people. We also found significant literature that women are often thrust into crises that men believe are unwinnable - the "glass cliff" - and women more than men are willing to take on these "lost causes" often achieving success but sometimes failing and damaging their careers.

Our essays cover the following topics. Please enjoy and add your own observations about leading in times of crisis and the women you admire for their success in meeting these challenges.

The Role of Leader and Organizational Values and Culture
Leadership and Organizing for Action
The Importance of Communications and Leadership Role Modeling
Innovation, Expertise, Collaboration, and Decisiveness Key to Leadership in a Crisis
The Power of Women Acting Collectively to Catalyze Change
William & Mary in the Current Crises

As a reader, you may want to ask yourself the following questions:

- What are my personal experiences in managing crisis-what would I add to these essays?
- What are the best examples of crisis management I have observed in others?
- If I could give three pieces of advice to others, what would they be?



¹ <https://www.wm.edu/sites/100yearsofwomen/anniversary-story/index.php>

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The Importance of Communication and Leadership Role Modeling in a Crisis

When most leaders confront a crisis, communications are both urgent and top of mind. Articles on crisis leadership often focus almost solely on communications strategy. There is unanimous consensus that crisis communications should be candid, frequent, authentic and informative. Acknowledging ambiguity, leaders should share what is known and what is unknown. Leaders should communicate a plan that all can understand. But what is even more difficult for leaders is balancing the mandate to inform with hard truths while still creating hope that better days lie ahead. "These leaders address the fears of their followers without feeding them." The best leaders strike that balance creating trust, confidence and even optimism, often by sharing a vision of how the community together will get through a crisis to an envisioned future state. One observer calls the most successful communications style "deliberate calm". He commented that the emotional impact of communication is 55% visual, 38% tone and only 7% what you actually say.



(Image description: Keisha Lance Bottoms, Mayor of Atlanta, GA)¹

During both the current pandemic and racial justice crises, Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms of Atlanta has demonstrated that "deliberate calm". Appearing frequently on local and national television, Mayor Bottoms has championed her city even when in opposition to the Georgia governor's COVID communications. Her media presence is both strong and reassuring. For instance, while supporting peaceful demonstrations and the underlying issues, she has strongly denounced and addressed violence in her city. In a joint interview

with Mayor Muriel Bowser of Washington DC, she said "The solution is not to destroy our cities."

Great historical examples of achieving this delicate communication balance are Winston Churchill during WWII and FDR during the Great Depression. What may be forgotten is that Eleanor Roosevelt also was a great communicator during the Depression and WWII. She said "A good leader inspires people to have confidence in the leader. A great leader inspires people to have confidence in themselves." Ms. Roosevelt wrote 8000 newspaper columns, 27 books and delivered 1,400 speeches during her time in public service, thereby revolutionizing community building by creating movements related to the rights of African Americans, women, children and workers.



(Image description: Barbara Jordan, Civil Rights Leader)²

Barbara Jordan was the first African American woman from the South elected to the US Congress in 1972 and she was the first to also address the Democratic National Convention. Ms. Jordan was an attorney, educator and leader in the Civil Rights Movement. Among her many skills, Jordan was known as a great communicator. She had gravitas, well-reasoned arguments and an authenticity that impressed her colleagues regardless of party. Many remember that on July 25, 1974, Jordan delivered a 15-minute televised speech in front of the members of the US House Judiciary Committee hearings on the impeachment of Richard Nixon. This speech is thought to be one of the best speeches of 20th-century American history. Throughout her speech, Jordan strongly stood by the Constitution of the United States, defending the checks and balances system, which was set in place to inhibit any politician from abusing their power. This powerful and

influential statement earned Jordan national praise for her rhetoric, morals, and wisdom.

Nancy Koehn in a Harvard Business Review article comments on how strong leaders exhibit behaviors that build confidence and trust. For instance, they get comfortable with ambiguity and chaos, navigating with their followers through the turbulence, adapting and changing direction if needed, as new information is developed. They demonstrate that they can make mistakes but can learn from them and pivot when needed.

In the pandemic crisis, it began with more unknown than known. Leaders like Governors Gretchen Whitmer, Mike De Wine, Gavin Newsome, Larry Hogan, Andrew Cuomo and Wanda Vasquez all have had both state and national high visibility for their approaches to the pandemic. Each is a great communicator and achieves that delicate balance between hard truths and providing hope. Each acted early with decisive action and a plan, and has used data and expert advice to cope with the twists and turns of the pandemic. And each has been successful in enlisting the support of the public in meeting the challenges. Their high approval ratings are based on the trust and confidence the public has in these governors to lead them through the ambiguity and danger.



(Image description: Former First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt)³

Eleanor Roosevelt is also a great example of modeling the behavior she would like to see. Authenticity is palpable. She did not communicate from an ivory tower. Rather, she traveled throughout the country and later the world, seeing and listening to real people. Her empathy was evident to all. She also was courageous, braving the Klu Klux Klan in the South when, against all advice, she traveled there to champion civil rights. The lesson here is that all the well-crafted communications are hollow if the leaders do not themselves exhibit the values and behaviors they preach. That dissonance creates mistrust and cynicism – and can often derail people from doing what is best in crisis. It also undermines people's

confidence that the crisis can be managed successfully and that their leaders are competent.

At the present time, there are unprecedented parallel and related crises of a life-threatening health pandemic, an economic crisis approaching depression level unemployment and a racial justice challenge. All these have disproportionately affected black and other minority people.

Kimberle Crenshaw's writings revolve around civil rights, black feminist legal theory, race, racism, and the law. She has advanced a theory of intersectionality.

Intersectionality posits that issues of race, socio-economic status and gender are often not separate but related. Many leaders today are "connecting the dots" in these three crises, communicating this phenomenon and looking for "intersectional" solutions.

As a leader, when you enter a crisis, start with these questions:

- What is my communications strategy?
Timing, content, participants
- How do I ensure I have the data and information I need to communicate honestly and fully?
- What can I legitimately say to give people hope and balance the hard truths I must communicate?
- How do I "inspire people to have confidence in themselves"?
- How do I obtain feedback from my listeners and use that to fine-tune my communications?
- What do I want to demonstrate and reveal about myself that will support candor, competency and empathy thus engendering trust and confidence?



1 <https://www.atlantamagazine.com/news-culture-articles/atlanta-mayor-keisha-lance-bottoms-its-been-difficult-for-me-to-sleep-because-i-wake-up-during-the-night-thinking-about-issues/>

2 <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/barbara-c-jordan>

3 <https://www.history.com/topics/first-ladies/eleanor-roosevelt>

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Innovation, Expertise, Collaboration, and Decisiveness Key to Leadership in a Crisis



(Image description: Ada, Countess of Lovelace)¹

In his book, *The Innovators*, Walter Isaacson begins and ends his work with an appreciation of Ada, Countess of Lovelace, one who appreciated the beauty of mathematics and became an iconic figure in the history of computing. Isaacson notes that Ada “was able to glimpse a future in which machines would become partners of the human imagination.” What Ada recognized and Isaacson celebrated was that a merging of disciplines could create something entirely new.

To be open to possibility yet move swiftly to solve problems defines effective leadership in a crisis. What current research shows is that women are particularly effective leaders in crisis. Women leaders are more generally prepared and demonstrate expertise, a willingness to listen, a respect for collaboration, and also recognize the need to take decisive action in dangerous or ambiguous situations.

In “Ladies who launch: the women behind the *Apollo* Program,” Sue Nelson, writing in *Science Focus*, notes that women were key to the success of the space program but were seldom recognized for their contributions. She recounts the success of engineer Mary Jackson and mathematicians Dorothy Vaughan and Katherine Johnson, made famous in the book and later the movie *Hidden Figures*.



(Image description: Katherine Johnson, NASA Mathematician)²

Mrs. Johnson, who calculated the precise trajectories that would let *Apollo 11* land on the moon in 1969, also provided the calculations that helped plot the successful flight of Alan Shepard in 1961 and John Glenn in 1962. She explained

how she went about calculating the trajectory for Alan Shepard’s flight: “The early trajectory was a parabola, and it was easy to predict where it would be at any point. Early on, when they said they wanted the capsule to come down at a certain place, they were trying to compute when it should start. I said, ‘Let me do it. You tell me when you want it and where you want it to land, and I’ll do it backwards and tell you when to take off.’” Her decisiveness and intellect were such that when John Glenn was to orbit the Earth in 1962, he would not go until Johnson had checked the work of NASA’s electronic computers. For her many contributions, her example, and her leadership, in 2015, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 2018, William and Mary, recognizing the success of a longtime resident of Hampton and Newport News, granted Katherine Johnson an Honorary Doctor of Science.



(Image description: Judith Love Cohen, Engineer)³

Judith Love Cohen, another pioneering woman in the space industry, helped save the crew of *Apollo 13*. Cohen’s son explains, “When the service module was damaged by an explosion on its way to the moon, there was a near total failure of power in the command module. The crew had to return to the lunar module to stay warm. . . fortunately there was a computer inside the lunar module for its own navigation, if, for any reason, the landing had to be stopped: Cohen’s Abort Guidance System.” Cohen also participated in a team that designed the return-to-Earth orbit. Cohen’s son explains that the team “convinced NASA—against their initial desires—to incorporate this orbit design into the design for the mission. Without the return-to-Earth orbit design, the *Apollo 13* astronauts could not have gotten home.”

Mae Jemison, who watched the flights of *Apollo* as a child, became the first African American woman in space as the mission specialist for the space shuttle Endeavour in September 1992. Jemison wrote in the *New York Times*, “When I grew up in the 1960’s, the only American astronauts were men. Looking

out the window of the space shuttle, I thought if that little girl growing up in Chicago could see her older self now, she would have a huge grin on her face.” Jemison, who was a chemical engineer, a medical doctor, and a Peace Corps medical officer who worked in Liberia and Sierra Leone for two years before joining the NASA program, continues to inspire others as she works to encourage children toward careers in the sciences. She had her own fears to overcome as an astronaut. Afraid of heights, she logged over 190 hours in space.

Women lead through preparation, expertise, tenacity, and a willingness to challenge and risk when necessary. Alice Eastwood, Curator of Botany at the California Academy of Sciences, saved many of the important plants in the collection from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Although downtown San Francisco was in flames, Eastwood made it to the academy, entered the building despite the danger, climbed to her 6th floor office and began filling her work apron with specimens. According to an account published in the *Proceedings of the California Academy of Sciences*, she fashioned a cord from ropes that reached back to the first floor, and, with a friend, saved close to 1500 specimens. Eastwood lost most of her personal possessions in the fire but managed to protect the specimens. When the museum reopened in 1916, her specimens were the nucleus of the collection. By 1918, under her leadership, the botanical collections had grown to more than 50,000 specimens.



(Image description: Edith Roberts, Professor and Botanist)⁴

Edith Roberts, a professor and botanist who created the first ecological laboratory in the United States, proved that plants were the main source of vitamin A. From 1915 to 1917, she worked for the US Department of Agriculture, traveling throughout the states to educate women on managing farms in place of men who were fighting in World War I.

Roberts’ spiritual heir for recognizing environmental impact on community and the power of women to work for change, Heather McTeer Toney, currently national field director of Moms Clean Air Force, was the first African American mayor of Greenville, Mississippi. She writes, “Over the course of my eight years as mayor, Greenville experienced two 500-year flood

events. . . It felt that no one was listening to the voices of the poor, of rural folks, of Southerners. We knew then just as we do now: Climate change is a threat to black life.” She continues to speak out, encouraging others to share the message of climate impact and expertise on what can be done. Her message is an active and insistent call for change.

Leadership requires vision and flexibility. Angela Merkel, who holds a doctorate in quantum physics, easily explains to the population how our current crisis, COVID-19, spreads. She was quick to fast-track COVID-19 antibody testing, now widespread in Germany and first of its kind in Europe. Germany is estimated to run 120,000 tests per day, according to an analysis that appeared in *Forbes* magazine.

To act decisively in times of crisis has been shown to be an attribute of women leaders. Stephanie Denning, writing for *Forbes*, noted that “if we look at the countries that have fared the best during this pandemic, the countries are helmed by women. And the leaders who have demonstrated to be the most decisive—and calm—have also been women.” Among the countries Denning cited are Taiwan, Denmark, New Zealand, and Germany. Denning concludes that a common theme runs through the successful actions taken by these leaders: recognizing that a successful defense takes more than one person, a willingness to listen to experts, and the ability to take decisive action.

What Denning has described is also essential for innovation. Walter Isaacson: “The most successful endeavors in the digital age were those run by leaders who fostered collaboration while also providing a clear vision.” The lessons that Isaacson shares—creativity is a collaborative process, innovation comes from teams more often than from a lone genius, and collaboration crosses generations-- are pertinent to the digital age. The best innovators, he observes, “took the baton from those who preceded them.” A willingness to listen, to engage, to draw on talents of others, to provide clarity and vision are essential for innovation and for leadership. What binds them together, and with this Isaacson takes us back to Ada Lovelace, is creativity and a rebellious sense of wonder.



1 <https://www.biography.com/scholar/ada-lovelace>

2 <https://www.nasa.gov/content/katherine-johnson-biography>

3 <https://viterbischool.usc.edu/news/2016/07/in-memory-of-judith-love-cohen-mother-wife-friend-author-engineer/>

4 https://assembly.state.ny.us/write/upload/member_files/106/pdfs/20180305_80032.pdf