

Preventing + Navigating Leadership Failures

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—GREG LEE, LIVESTRONG PRESIDENT AND CEO

Lance Armstrong—cancer survivor, seven-time Tour de France winner and arguably the most famous cyclist of all time—founded Livestrong, a nonprofit that provides support for people affected by cancer. During the decade after it was founded, the organization achieved great success and support as its founder's star ascended, raising tens of millions of dollars and achieving stratospheric levels of brand awareness (remember those yellow wristbands?). Livestrong, which had even started as the Lance Armstrong Foundation, was inextricably linked to Armstrong's personal story as an overcomer and champion. ESPN noted, "At its peak, Livestrong took in \$41 million in donations in 2009, when Armstrong came out of retirement to finish third in the Tour de France."

The nonprofit's success took a turn when Armstrong was stripped of all his titles. He finally confessed to using performance-enhancing drugs in 2012 after years of controversy, investigations, lawsuits and public scrutiny. The former professional cyclist faced a massive reputational fallout, which included removal from the nonprofit he founded. Livestrong's board of directors knew that for the organization to have a chance of survival, it must separate itself from the leader who had misled so many for so long to such a detrimental degree.

Years later, Livestrong has had to continually reinvent itself to stay afloat. The organization still struggles to distance itself from its controversial founder. "We have done everything we can...to tell people that [Livestrong] is not about one person," said Greg Lee, Livestrong president and CEO. "We have a changing focus, a new mission and a new visual identity"

Armstrong mostly declines commenting on the organization now, but he did say this in 2020 about his removal from the nonprofit: “The Livestrong situation angers me. If it were me, I would’ve said, ‘You’re in time out...but you’re still the founder and, at some point, the dust will settle here and not just you, but we as an organization—we, you, me—can reemerge.’ I worked too hard to make it great, and it’s a bummer.”

Armstrong’s inability to realize how his actions had tainted the organization, and his rationalization of his choices, are responses often repeated by many failed leaders in other industries, including Christian ministry.

The justification that because an organization was doing good works, a leader should be excused of his or her bad choices—or in extreme cases, allowed to continue them—is familiar and flawed. Columnist David French noted this in discussing Christian leaders facing similar situations. To paraphrase, “Orthodoxy failed to instill proper practice. Instead, their outward expressions of faith made them unaware of their own shortcomings.”



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—DAVID FRENCH, COLUMNIST

In response to the onslaught of leadership failures we see, there are steps you can take to prevent, prepare for and navigate these crises. Even if you’re not the senior leader of your church, school or ministry, everyone at the organization plays a role in fostering accountability and building or maintaining a healthy culture.

Having worked with scores of faith-based nonprofits, we offer the following recommendations to champion responsibility, rebuild trust and restore the reputation of teams, organizations and, ultimately, the Kingdom.

1. Posture + Perspective

A POSTURE OF HUMILITY IS CRITICAL

Many leaders are charismatic and have an ability to draw people to themselves. But is the leader humble? Guilty or innocent, the correct posture and perspective is integral to weathering accusations and instances of leadership failure. We have seen cases in which an accusation alone hurt a public figure because of his or her reaction to it. Responding rashly or defensively will almost always push people away or escalate the situation. In any crisis, it is important to approach the situation with a calm, balanced posture, which helps us to listen, learn and remain open to others' concerns. Leaders and staff should then maintain a humble posture, especially in trying times. Everyone would agree that wisdom is needed during a crisis, and the Bible makes it clear in James 3:13-18 that humility and wisdom are closely tied.

His foundational posture is crucial because practicing ownership starts with humility. **People admire and trust those who own problems and fix them, because ownership demonstrates integrity and an ability to handle the situation.** Ownership is one of the absolutes in crisis management, but it is not possible without a foundation of humility.



**The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable,
gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits,
impartial and sincere.**

—JAMES 2:17

THERE IS NO STATUTE OF LIMITATIONS IN THE COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION.

Inspired by #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements, we have all seen past sins resurface. Excusing consequences for misbehavior based on the time elapsed is not an acceptable defense in the court of public opinion. In our current culture, the moment a leader or organization makes a comment noting the passage of time—“I did make a mistake, but it was a very long time ago...”—he or she has communicated tone deafness to the plight of the victim that will be hard to overcome.

Humility and ownership—regardless of when or why the offense occurred—will not suddenly appear when you need it in a crisis. Staff and leaders should practice this posture and perspective in all areas of ministry for the response to be an authentic representation of character. Just as the practice of a sport’s fundamentals may seem tiresome, once mastered, they are the foundation for success. Similarly, we must practice these Scriptural concepts daily in order to authentically employ them in times of crisis. Wisdom, self-control, being above reproach and remaining humble are traits we should celebrate in our leaders more than charisma and winsomeness.

2. Prevent

ARE YOU FOLLOWING BEST PRACTICES TO PREVENT A CRISIS?

A friend once said we're all about six small decisions away from a big mistake. Genesis tells us that sin is crouching at our door, waiting to devour us, but we must master it.

With such a strong biblical admonition and the myriad examples of those who did not heed it, it's worth conducting a sober evaluation of whether your organization is following best practices to prevent a crisis.

Protect your team before an incident occurs. Don't wait until after.

Decisions that may seem harmless in good times—allowing only friends or family to serve on your board of directors or failing to establish formal policies regarding travel or expense accounts—may leave you particularly vulnerable.

Standards and policies must be developed and enforced to ensure the security and safety of everyone in the organization, including leaders. If you or your staff think you don't need a formal policy on an issue, ask yourself why and don't be nearsighted in your assessment.

For instance, do you hope your organization will grow? Then, wouldn't it be better to have these policies in place now than to try to implement them retroactively? Build your foundation securely with an eye toward the future and the unexpected.

Additionally, help your team understand that the guidelines in place are guardrails for everyone's protection—theirs, yours and those in your care. By adhering to certain policies or guidelines, employees are mitigating the chances of being put in precarious situations, having accusations made against them, facing burnout and more.

3. Prepare

PREPARING FOR FAILURES CAN HELP MITIGATE THEIR OCCURENCE

In 2020, Paul David Tripp wrote *Lead*, primarily for pastors. “We have all been witnesses to the fall of well-known pastors with a huge amount of influence and notoriety,” he wrote, “but for every public falling, there are hundreds of unknown pastors who have lapsed, have left both their leadership and their church in crisis or are spiritual shells of the pastors they once were.” Case in point: More than half of the endorsements on the back cover of a different book of Tripp’s were from pastors who have since either experienced a failure in leadership or left the faith entirely.

Leadership crises come in all shapes and sizes, including management issues, moral failures, inappropriate behavior and simple human error.



**It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and
only one bad one to lose it.**

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

People will fail us, and we must ensure our organizations can survive such failings. Just as you wouldn’t buy a home without also getting home insurance, you shouldn’t run an organization without a crisis plan and advisor in place.



If you're proactive, you focus on preparing. If you're reactive, you end up focusing on repairing.

—JOHN MAXWELL

When you think of organizations that weathered crises well, most likely that was due to preparation on their end, knowing one day that their time would come. This is true for all crises, even leadership failures.

Many organizations call us to the table once a crisis has already happened. But the most successful organizations are those that call us well in advance to prepare for their day. The time and effort an organization invests in the planning process is critical in determining how well your organization and its reputation recover from a crisis—big or small.

Planning for the possibility of a leadership failure is not disloyalty, it's wise management.

Advance preparation enables you to:

- Respond quickly, strategically and thoughtfully when an incident arises.
- Increase your chances of surviving the crisis.
- Mitigate the occurrence of risk, because you often become aware of vulnerabilities in the process, such as the lack of guidelines discussed earlier, or unhealthy patterns or cultures in the organization.

4. Proceed

DEMONSTRATE THAT YOU ARE COMMITTED TO IMPROVEMENT

Your response must be swift, serious and thorough. Many organizations confuse responses with excuses or avoiding blame, respond too slowly or remain reactive instead of proactively engaging the situation. This sows distrust and builds negative momentum that makes a successful recovery even more difficult.

Furthermore, so often when leaders are accused, they immediately seek self-preservation and “circle the wagons” to defend, deflect, deny and prove their innocence at all costs. If their organization follows suit—rather than investigating the matter properly—the singular focus on broadcasting complete innocence leaves them vulnerable. Forgotten or hidden details trickle out, callousness toward the accusations or accuser damages perception, or defensive responses feel hollow because they lack the weight of substantiation. In these cases, self-preservation can lead to self-destruction.

As stated earlier, leaders and staff should then instead maintain a humble posture on any legitimate accusation. Listen, learn, investigate, suspend judgment and, ultimately, work to restore anything that was broken.

Surprisingly, sometimes a crisis can turn into an opportunity to build goodwill if an organization handles it well. The famous 1982 Tylenol crisis is a great example of this. Authenticity, in addition to ownership, is a core principle of achieving this positive outcome, and we’ve written about both here.

Finally, effective navigation of leadership failures requires an experienced, objective counselor outside your organization. You need someone unaffected by the echo chamber of company culture, unafraid of a reprimand for speaking hard truth and seasoned in how crises work.



People are very bad at apologizing but very good at wanting an apology. But the best way for an apology to appear genuine is the acknowledgment of a mistake while accepting that forgiveness should never be expected, but rather earned through genuine growth and change.

—CORY HARRISON, PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

There is no formula or timeline for weathering leadership failure, but we can guarantee that it will last longer than you want it to. Be patient. Don't trade long-term gain for short-term respite. It can be extremely difficult to keep the long-term in mind when you have donors, staff and the general public airing their various grievances. But at a certain point, you must accept the consequences, own your role in it and demonstrate with your actions that you are committed to improvement.

Cory Paul Harrison, a professor of rhetoric at The University of Alabama, said "People are very bad at apologizing but very good at wanting an apology. But the best way for an apology to appear genuine is the acknowledgment of a mistake while accepting that forgiveness should never be expected, but rather earned through genuine growth and change."

With wisdom and work, nonprofit leaders and managers can prevent and prepare for the failures of others. This is good stewardship of the gifts and responsibilities entrusted to us by the Lord.

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of faith-driven organizations.*

