
Leadership Lessons from the Paris Terror Attacks



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In times of crisis, be clear about where you want to go and flexible in how you get there.

Leadership during a crisis is very different to leadership in a normal environment. Tension and stress can prompt knee-jerk reactions, but when an emergency strikes thoughtful, considered action is even more vital. On November 14 last year, amidst the horror of the terrorist attacks in Paris, I received a remarkable email, demonstrating a leadership style that addressed crisis in a way that I have seldom seen and one that I found to be both effective and very human.

Let me put it into context. Stéphane Girard owns two wine bars in Paris. As he woke that Saturday morning, still dazed as the horrific details of the attacks continued to roll in, he received an SMS from one of his managers: “What do we do about opening?” The message caught him off-guard. He hadn’t really thought there was an option: his immediate reaction was, “We can’t let the terrorists win; we have to open.”

Increase perspective

On consideration, he recognised that his employees may have a very different viewpoint.

His manager, for example, lived in a working-class neighbourhood which was experiencing unusually heavy police activity. Meanwhile, there was an official plea from the mayor of Paris urging Parisians to stay home and refrain from going out.

Girard quickly realised that he couldn't just order his employees to work, nor was it appropriate, given they had sought his leadership, to simply say, "Do as you wish".

To get a broader perspective, he sent out an SMS to people in his network asking their advice, "Would you open Wine-by-One today?"

The responses he received ran the gamut from his initial position to highlighting very important concerns about customer and employee safety, as well as touching on issues of responsibility and employee empowerment.

After considering his options, he sent the following email to the bars' managers:

"Good morning to both of you,

I imagine that you, like all of us, had a horrible night, and that you are still cloistered at home, but safe at least.

What has happened (and may still be happening) is really horrible – and could have been even worse if the kamikazes had been in crowds and caused hundreds of deaths, as was certainly planned. I also believe that we'll see further similar attacks in the future. My thoughts are obviously with all the innocent victims that were murdered and their loved ones. We will all need time to grieve.

We can't do much about what happened yesterday, but we can still shape the future, at least our future, and make sure that Paris continues to live.

Keeping shops closed today would contribute to making Paris a ghost town and hence handing a victory to the terrorists who are seeking the demise of our country and our civilisation. This is why I think we should open, even though my guess is that we will have very few clients. Yet, it is showing our defiance to their grim plans and our resolve not to let them win.

However, I also understand that, after the terrible shock of last night, the mood to open just isn't there. I'd like to thank you as well for holding the fort last night, and closing down responsibly, before going home to your families and safety.

I've been asking for advice since this morning, to get a sense of what people would do if they were me. I am convinced that any decision to open should remain a deep personal choice, which is why I do not wish, nor even can consider taking a decision (on my own) that would require you to come to work; particularly if you don't feel safe, which is something I would understand and cannot deny or even dismiss at this time.

We must make a choice (together) as to whether to open tonight or not.

If we choose to open, then I would suggest we do so without the temporary student interns, and that we put up a sign and candles in memory of the victims, and explain that it was important for us to be there and provide a place for people to come and seek and share human contact. And, that we feel free to close if business were to become too slow or simply too depressing.

However, this is only a proposal on my part, based on my reflections, on the advice I've gathered, and from my observation of how life is resuming back in our streets. You are free to make your own decision, as managers of your bars, consulting your teams and those around you. Be assured that whatever shape your decisions take, they will be treated with utmost respect and I will fully and completely back you up.

Take time to think about it before making the call at 6.00 pm. I thank you and of course I am available by phone if you wish to discuss further."

Beyond the humanism in the communication, I was impressed by two things: the way he reached out to his extensive informal network to get their take on a business decision; and the way he built employee engagement by making them part of the decision process.

Clarifying intent in a crisis

By consulting his informal network, Girard admitted that he was not an expert and was willing to take advice from many divergent perspectives. He was also willing to accept the responsibility not only of how the decision would be made but for the consequences of that decision, acknowledging the

expertise of his managers and conveying his trust that they would make the right decision for their respective establishments. He is effectively saying, “There will be no questioning of your decision” and “I will bear the entire responsibility”.

Girard’s intention is clear. By telling his managers, “I don’t want to contribute to making Paris a ghost town, yet I want you to feel safe”, he displays great clarity in his objective, and the flexibility to accept whatever decision they choose. While he cannot morally make the decision for them, he can frame the issue and convey his resolve.

For teams to be effective, they have to understand (and adhere to) an objective; have the skills and capabilities to reach the objective; and the self-determination to make the right moves. Leadership in this situation is not just about flexibility, it’s about ensuring teams have a clear understanding of the situation, the mastery to take the action required and the autonomy to make decisions. It is, in effect, about **Fair Process**, a leadership style that seeks to build trust and commitment to produce voluntary cooperation.

Fair Process Leadership

The other point about Fair Process is that Girard, having established the “burning platform”, allows different potential solutions to be imagined and explored. Finally, as the leader, he takes his part of the decision and explains it, stating explicitly how execution would be rewarded (mostly in pride and active resistance to those that had caused so much harm to Parisians the previous evening).

Hopefully, there won’t be a “next time” for Girard to apply what he learned. But there are lessons to be gained in complex and ambiguous environments, not least being: the importance of a clear vision; the ability to create mechanisms for expanding perspectives; and having an empowered team of people with the focus and skills to reach the goal.

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