

Applied Crisis Management in the Supply Chain: A Qualitative Study

Honors Thesis

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how supply chain leaders handle crisis and what effective leadership looks like. I conducted qualitative interviews with six leaders across manufacturing, logistics, procurement, healthcare, and rail. Their experiences point to several themes that shape crisis response, including the severity of the disruption, the vulnerabilities within a complex supply chain, and the leader's own capabilities.

Crises happen in every industry. They create financial risk, time pressure, and a need for strong coordination across teams. The leaders I interviewed described a shared approach. They stay outwardly steady while managing internal stress, pull people and resources together quickly, and turn each disruption into a learning opportunity through root cause analysis and prevention planning.

A key takeaway is that a supply chain never leaves a crisis in the same condition it entered. Disruption exposes weak spots and moves the organization from a mindset focus on efficiency toward greater resilience. Overall, the research shows that effective crisis leadership relies less on technical expertise and more on emotional intelligence and a commitment to supporting teams through uncertainty.

## Introduction

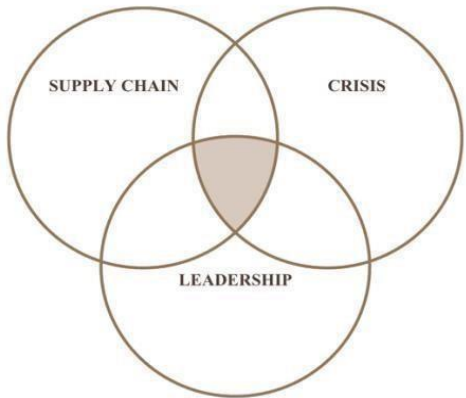
Modern supply chains run quietly in the background of daily life, yet their complexity leaves them open to sudden shocks. When things break down, attention shifts quickly from routine operations to the leaders who must navigate the uncertainty. These networks depend on coordination, timing, and trust across many organizations. Recent years showed how fragile that system can be. Store shelves emptied, hospitals struggled to get basic protective gear, and everyday items doubled in price. What once felt guaranteed, the idea that what we need will always be available, suddenly wasn't. These moments showed just how critical supply chains are and how quickly things can fall apart when they fail.

Behind every product is a long line of people and processes. Raw materials move to factories, then to warehouses, then to stores, and finally to customers. This is an example of a standard supply chain, but every company has a different design. They must also consider customer returns, creating reverse logistics that flips the chain in the opposite direction. There are countless steps along the way, and most companies only have so much visibility into them. Sometimes competitive advantage dictates that no visibility can be given, and upstream suppliers remain anonymous to those downstream. Most major companies have hundreds of suppliers and customers, so when catastrophe strikes, how can a business expect and prevent it? A single issue can spread fast, affecting multiple industries and bringing operations to a stop. In those situations, strong leadership makes the difference between recovery and shutdown. But even great leaders can't forecast every disruption. It takes planning, research, and funding to prepare for crises and keep a business stable when things go wrong.

A crisis in the supply chain can look different every time. A natural disaster might shut down production for weeks. A cyberattack could lock up vital systems. A port closure can leave shipments stranded, and a major infectious illness can sweep the world, shutting down operations in days. It is impossible to perfectly anticipate a crisis, making preparation difficult and a quick and easy solution unlikely. That's where leadership becomes critical. The choices leaders make in those moments shape how quickly a company recovers and whether they keep the trust of their people and partners. Clear communication, quick thinking, and adaptability often separate companies that recover from those that don't.

Preventative steps like sourcing from multiple suppliers can lower risk, but they also raise costs and strain relationships. The best solution is one that benefits both sides, but a win-win situation is easier said than done when both parties want the best deal. Leaders who manage these relationships and negotiations play a huge role in whether a company can adapt and survive. It takes fair and informed management, constant research, and incredible funding to stay afloat and successful in today's economy. Understanding how leaders make decisions and manage chaos can reveal what it really takes to keep the supply chain running when the world feels unpredictable. This thesis explores those decisions, and the lessons learned from leaders who have faced crises firsthand, aiming to understand what effective crisis management truly looks like in today's global supply chain landscape.

# Literature Review



## Crisis

Crisis in a business context is widely recognized as a serious problem because it disrupts normal operations and creates conditions that can quickly harm an organization and its stakeholders. For the purpose of this thesis, a crisis is defined as a rare, high-impact event that disrupts normal operations, threatens the stability of an organization and its stakeholders, and requires rapid decision-making and resource allocation beyond existing processes. Crises are often novel, meaning existing processes may not apply. Many fall into the category of a black swan event, which refers to an unexpected and hard-to-predict disruption that carries major consequences and can only be fully understood in hindsight. Together, these characteristics make crisis a unique challenge for supply chain systems and the leaders responsible for guiding them.

This definition of crisis is built upon many books and research articles definitions. Laurence Barton's book, *'Crisis Leadership Now: A Real World Guide to Preparing for Threats, Disaster, Sabotage, and Scandal'* defines crisis as, "A crisis, as you will see, is any event that can seriously harm the people, reputation, or financial condition of an organization." (2009) Barton goes on to say that most multi-national companies experience crisis often but must utilize their network of cross-functional teams to delegate and solve issues as they arise. Barton then dives into case studies of many gruesome and tragic events that have befallen major industries and companies in the early 2000's, how the events could have been prevented, and what the fallout was after they occurred.

Andrew Hiles provides another useful classification in *'The Definitive Handbook of Business Continuity Management – Second Edition.'* He identifies four elements that signal a crisis:

1. Missing or unreliable information
2. Limited time to act
3. A threat to people or essential resources
4. A demand for resources that exceeds what is available

He summarizes this with a straightforward definition, describing a crisis as “a critical problem that has a demand for resources that exceeds the resources available.”(Hiles, 2015)

For crisis management, Andrew Hiles specifies the varied styles of management that serve different levels of crisis. He writes, “In conventional crisis management, this reaction placed most attention on responding to the stimulus event (onset management) and dealing with the impacts on people and resources inflicted by that stimulus event (impact management).” (2015) Business Continuity Management (BCM) is the idea that action should be taken to revert an organization to the functioning level before the crisis event. Crisis Management (CM) is dealing with a crisis as it is active with a focus on response. Both BCM and CM focus on recovery management. Approaching a crisis before, during, and after it happens can be referred to as an RRRR action approach. Reduction, Readiness, Response, Recovery. There is an emphasis put on different forms of management, which I noticed in the interviews I held with supply chain leaders. To split the groups up into three, some leaders deal with the situation head-on, such as a first line of defense and action, and the second group deals with the impacts the event has on the organization and focus on putting out fires. The third group focuses on recovery and investigating failures in the process for events to not repeat themselves.

Hiles writes that crisis management seeks to mitigate sources and impact of a crisis event, improve crisis onset management, improve crisis impact management during crisis response, and enhance recovery from crisis through effective/rapid recovery management action. These are often happening simultaneously and require a team of active leaders and representatives working on each focus group.

Crises are different from routine problems within an organization. According to the ‘*Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior Crisis Leadership*’ by Ronald E. Riggio and Toby Newstead, “Crises are considered occurrences that threaten the fundamental operation or viability of an organization.” (Riggio & Newstead, 2025) They go on to explain that, unlike simple issues and problems, crisis is marked by low probability of happening, but high consequence that forces quick and actionable response. The definition of crisis has also shifted throughout the years as more crises have unfolded. The older definitions surrounded the idea of a major negative event that impacted an organization, but recent definitions specify the disruption a negative event has on the leaders and stakeholders involved with an organization. Due to the rarity of these events, leaders tend to not be well equipped with resources to respond, nor the knowledge or experience to manage a crisis. The review proposes 5 categories of crises: accidents, scandals, product safety and health incidents, employee centered crises, and natural disasters. To further categorize a crisis, Riggio and Newstead researched the 8 dimensions that decide what problems are crises rather than just a challenging situation.

1. Low Probability – a highly unlikely, unexpected, or unforeseen event.
2. Public – the event attracts attention from the public, media, and organization.
3. High Consequence – large negative repercussions for stakeholders and/or environments.

4. Force Rapid Action – Imposed time pressures on decision making that shape the crisis' effects.
5. Temporal – The time in which a crisis develops, escalates, and eventually resolves, categorized by a series of smaller events following.
6. Morally and Ethically Laden – Tradeoffs with unclear consequences for stakeholders.
7. Novelty and Ambiguity – An event with multiple causes with no known processes for resolution.
8. Emotionally Laden – Strong and varied emotions among stakeholders.

These dimensions provide a useful framework for evaluating the severity and nature of crisis events. I will use them to assess the crises described by the leaders I interviewed and to better understand how each situation tested their decision-making and leadership capabilities.

## Supply Chain

Supply chain can be defined in many ways across the literature, so it is important to clarify how it will be used in this thesis. At CSU, supply chain is taught as the combination of operations, logistics, and procurement. For this thesis, supply chain is defined as the interconnected network of facilities, processes, and relationships that transform raw materials into finished products and deliver them to end customers.

Operations is the internal production, and manufacturing process of a product. Logistics is the coordination of transportation for materials, taking factors such as cost, distance, and time into account. Procurement is the sourcing research, buying and negotiation of materials and services from suppliers. The supply chain flows downstream and upstream as product is pushed between supply, manufacturing and end customer nodes. It is the very infrastructure that organizations depend on for the movement of materials and information across an expansive network.

In the article, 'Understanding of Supply Chain: A Literature Review' by Rajendra Kumar Shukla has a definition of supply chain management, "Supply Chain Management is a network of facilities that produce raw materials, transform them into intermediate goods and then final products, and deliver the products to customers through a distribution system." (Shukla et al., 2011) They go on to write that the supply chain includes the procurement, manufacturing, and distribution of goods and services. Good supply chain management is the creation of as much value possible for as many stakeholders possible. They further dive into past definitions to show why we formatted the current one this way. Older synthesized definitions depict the supply chain as a connector between each element of the process, from raw materials to the end user and involves many different organizations. Although this is true, current definitions must account for reverse logistics such as customer returns and the more recent global perspective on trade and commerce.

In the article, *'Transformational Leadership and Supply Chain Performance: A Systematic Literature Review'* it is emphasized that, "when it comes to managing supply chain operations,

one of the most effective leadership styles to adopt is transformational leadership, which has been shown in several studies to maximize staff motivation and performance." (Hassan et al., 2024) The supply chain is a constantly shifting system of interconnected processes that are managed by people at every node. Over time, nodes evolve due to market and technological changes, which then affect the rest of the processes. For an organization to maintain a healthy and flexible supply chain, transformational leadership is necessary for organizations to maintain a competitive advantage while improving visibility and accuracy in logistics and procurement forecasting.

## Leadership

Leadership plays a central role in how organizations function, especially when they face uncertainty or disruption. For this thesis, leadership is defined as the ability to inspire and guide others toward a shared goal through trust, communication, adaptability, and emotional intelligence, especially when navigating uncertainty or crisis.

This definition was formulated by a combination of other research's definitions of leadership. The first is from *'Transformational Leadership and Supply Chain Performance: A Systematic Literature Review'* by Mohamed Abdinur Hassan and Hassan Ahmed Mohamed Jakuula who state, "Leadership is defined as the capacity to inspire people to voluntarily work toward a common objective." (Hassan et al., 2024) They go on to talk about how an effective leader must stay informed and present. Leadership is a social practice requiring open communication, trusting relationships, and the character attributes that are required to support build the people around them within an organization. A leader has the role of decision making with a common goal with those around them and utilizes the support of other community members in a value maximizing way. The most effective leaders are those that inspire and influence others to the leader's will and lead with good intentions, therefore increasing job satisfaction and retentions.

The Harvard Business Review article *'Our Favorite Management Tips on Leading Through Uncertainty'* explains that when disruption strikes, strong leaders don't freeze but instead move forward. The world never stops changing, so the best approach is to actively engage with uncertainty rather than resist it. Staying rigid only causes more harm. Even testing out possible solutions, knowing that some may fail, helps uncover the root of the problem and strengthens decision-making. The article emphasizes the importance of balancing organizational goals with the well-being of employees. Quick fixes, like layoffs, may seem efficient but can damage collaboration and trust. Leaders must make fast, informed decisions with limited information while staying flexible as new details emerge. Above all, they should stay calm, direct, and honest. People value transparency, especially during uncertainty, and a leader who can communicate purpose with composure gives their team a sense of stability. (HBR Editors, 2025) In the book *'Disruptions and flux in Higher Education: Turning the focus towards the early*

*career researcher*' by Cecile Gerwel Proches and Upasana Gitanjali Singh, chapter nine defines leadership as the ability to “empower all stakeholders to contribute to resilience efforts.” The authors describe effective leaders as those who combine emotional intelligence, strategic vision, and decisiveness to guide their organizations through crisis. VUCA stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous environments or situations. (Proches & Singh, 2023) In this context, they highlight the growing importance of technology in strengthening communication and supporting remote operations during disruption. Their work showcases how resilience comes from a strong, interconnected culture built on trust and openness to innovation. Such qualities allow institutions to adapt, recover, and grow stronger after crises. Having some level of preparedness, response, recovery, and learning are necessary for a structured crisis management framework in an organization.

## Methods

**Research Design:** I used a qualitative, interview-based research design. This approach let me gather detailed stories and understand how leaders think and respond during real disruptions.

**Sampling strategy:** I used a within network approach and then expanded through snowball sampling. Each person I interviewed connected me with additional leaders who had relevant experience.

**Sample:** I interviewed 6 people.

- Person 1 has nearly four decades of experience in supply chain and operational leadership, including roles such as a Director of Indirect Purchasing for a major North American manufacturer, a Vice President, and a Senior Director managing billions in procurement across the automotive and aerospace sectors.
- Person 2 serves as a Senior Director of Operations in the trucking and logistics industry, focusing on the management of people and processes within intermodal operations and directing a team of approximately 600 employees, including corporate workers and truck drivers.
- Person 3 is a highly experienced manufacturing leader who spent over 20 years in mechanical maintenance in the beer canning industry, rising to the level of lead mechanic responsible for preventing and resolving downtime in high-volume production lines where disruptions cost thousands, following time in graphic arts and warehouse operations.
- Person 4 is a Senior Supply Chain Manager at a major medical devices company, where this leader balances short-term goals like reducing backorders with long-term inventory strategies. Drawing on 4 years in formal leadership roles, they guide teams through major supply chain challenges and healthcare crisis situations.
- Person 5 is a leader who has over 50 years of experience in the railroad industry, primarily focused on operations and labor relations for major corporations, including serving as a federal mediator and as a Senior Manager of Labor Relations responsible for handling critical strike threats.
- Person 6 is an experienced professional in the rail industry, having spent over 30 years in the operations side of the business, taking on roles in crew management and labor relations, before moving towards management of automotive logistics for rail car pooling and finally transitioning into consulting for the sector.

## Questions:

Here are my questions I asked all participants:

1. Can you briefly describe your current role and how long you've been in leadership positions?
2. Over the course of your career, have you led in situations where you faced a crisis defined as a significant unexpected disruption that impacted your operations?
3. Can you walk me through what happened, from when you first became aware of the issue to how it was resolved/handled?
4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the severity of this crisis for your organization? 1 being low severity and 10 being the highest severity.
5. Did you involve specific people or specific resources to work through these situations?
6. What was going through your mind when you confronted all of this? What was your initial response in terms of emotions, thoughts, and assumptions?
7. Looking back, what decision are you most proud of during this situation? What would you do differently?
8. Based on your experiences, what is your philosophy for leading through unexpected disruptions?
9. If you were mentoring a new manager who was about to face their first major crisis, what would be your advice to them?
10. Is there anything about leading through crises that we haven't discussed that you think is important?

The manner of asking these questions was fully structured, with each one delivered verbatim across the interviews. I chose these questions because they connect directly to the key themes defined earlier. I built the script using the core ideas from the literature review, aiming to highlight those same themes in each leader's story. The questions help me understand what happened during a disruption and how leaders think, respond, and adjust when they're faced with something unexpected.

I wanted to capture their role, the context of the crisis, and the steps they took from start to finish. The scale-of-severity question helped me compare situations across participants. I also asked about who they involved and what resources they pulled in, since collaboration and mobilizing support are major themes in crisis management.

The questions about emotions, thoughts, and assumptions were included to show how leaders process uncertainty in real time. Asking what they were proud of and what they'd change gave me insight into their reflection habits and how experience shapes growth. Finally, I asked about their overall philosophy and any advice they'd give new managers so I could understand the broader lessons they've taken from facing disruptions throughout their careers.

**Process:**

To gather interviews, I first reached out to my professors, who connected me with supply chain professionals experienced in leading through disruption. I also met people through College of Business club events and informal conversations in my day-to-day life. Each interview took place either virtually, by phone, or in person. After getting their consent and ensuring anonymity, I recorded every conversation and transcribed the audio using Turbo Scribe. To track how often certain themes from the literature review appeared across interviews, I used Notebook LM to help organize recurring topics and compare patterns.

**Analysis:**

To analyze the responses, I grouped comments by the major themes identified in the literature review, such as decision making, immediate emotional response, communication style, and recovery strategies. The prompts I gave Notebook LM assisted in pinpointing repeated phrases, leadership behaviors, and situational patterns to see where different leaders aligned or differed in their approach. From there, I looked for trends across interviews, like common instincts during the first moments of a crisis, shared problem-solving tactics, or recurring communication practices. This helped me translate individual stories into applied themes, discovering how leaders navigate disruptions.

**Limitations:**

These findings are based on a small, managerial centered sample, so the results reflect the perspectives of the individuals interviewed rather than the full range of leadership practices across the industry. The sample grew through personal connections and snowballing, which may have introduced some bias in who participated. Because the study relies on self-reported experiences, details are influenced by memory and personal interpretation. Even with these limits, the interviews still provide meaningful and consistent themes about how leaders respond when operations are disrupted.

**Use of AI Disclosure:**

The two artificial intelligence tools I used were Notebook LM and TurboScribe. Notebook LM helped organize and synthesize the interview content.

After uploading all transcripts, I used it to pull out repeated ideas and connect them to the themes of Crisis, Supply Chain, and Leadership. I asked Notebook LM the following questions for data analysis:

- Form an analysis of all the interviews about crisis management in the supply chain by pinpointing repeated phrases and leadership behavior patterns.

- Please draw from all the interviews for just the theme of Supply Chain, not combining Supply Chain with the other themes of Crisis or Leadership. What are the 5-8 main themes that get brought up across the interviews. Include citations.
- Please draw from all the interviews for just the theme of Crisis, not combining Crisis with the other themes of Supply Chain or Leadership. What are the 5-8 main themes that get brought up across the interviews. Include citations.
- Please draw from all the interviews for just the theme of Leadership, not combining Leadership with the other themes of Crisis or Supply Chain. What are the 5-8 main themes that get brought up across the interviews. Include citations.

Notebook LM works entirely from uploaded documents, which helps reduce hallucinated responses. I reviewed all extracted themes myself and adjusted the findings based on my own understanding as the interviewer and the only person who heard the full context of each story. My judgment ultimately guided how themes were interpreted and applied.

TurboScribe was used to create near word-for-word transcripts from the recorded voice memos for each interview.

# Analysis

## Crisis in Supply Chain Leadership

Throughout my interviews with six supply chain leaders, a consistent picture emerged of what crisis means in operational contexts. While the literature defines crisis as low probability, high consequence, and rapid action requirement situations (Riggio & Newstead, 2025), the lived experiences of these leaders revealed crisis as a complicated reality characterized by severe financial and operational threats, intense pressure, and the necessity for unknown yet immediate action.

The interviews brought up seven main themes regarding the handling of crisis. These themes closely relate with the theoretical dimensions established in my literature review, but they also reveal the practical, human side of crisis management that academic definitions sometimes miss. Crisis emerged not as a rare event but as a feature of high-stakes operations requiring leaders to be perpetually prepared for instability.

### **Theme 1: The Inevitability of Disruption**

Crisis is not a rare event but an almost common feature of operations, requiring leaders to be perpetually prepared for instability. For some leaders, managing daily disruptions is simply the job description. One leader noted that being a mechanic meant dealing with crises "all the time," specifically during threat of production line downtime that loses thousands of dollars every minute. A supply chain manager confirmed that they deal with crisis "every hour, every day," when describing decades of experience in high-volume industries with long supply chains.

A senior director mentioned that new operations or projects increase the likelihood for crisis, but they could not slow down production growth, "I mean, my team bought \$3.5 billion of parts... There's going to be three crises a day that could be horrible." This constant state of potential crisis reflects what the literature describes as VUCA environments: volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. (Proches & Singh, 2023) The railroad industry professional with over 50 years of experience mentioned this, noting that in operations and labor relations, crisis situations emerged regularly with the unions and among the on-site teams.

This challenges conventional assumptions about crisis as exceptional. We tend to prepare for the current and known world and not black swan events, raising fundamental questions about resource allocation: What's the cost of preparing for every unlikely event? How much time, effort, and planning should be invested in a possible problem when each improvement carries a high cost? If there's an 80% chance of something happening versus a 2% chance, how should resources be allocated proportionally? The only clear answer to these questions is 'it depends.'

### **Theme 2: The Initial Emotional Shift**

Leaders often describe their initial emotional response as frustration, stemming from the interruption of routine and the sudden demands placed on them. This reaction quickly transforms into a focused, high-energy drive that reflects the need to act as quickly as possible.

This is known as the "adrenaline" phase.

Another leader confirmed that they felt "fear and worry" internally, especially when dealing with a global pandemic. Many mentioned the need to project a "rock-solid" image externally, using a very good poker face so that the team does not become infected by panic. Fear and worry are contagious and can have dire consequences. A manager in the field of medical devices described a similar progression, moving from the shock of discovering a major issue to immediately mobilizing resources and gathering information. In healthcare, things must be sped up to save lives, often at the expense of money and current processes.

*“It was my first day on a new role, and the EPA shut down a sterilizer, and 80% of our revenue went through that sterilizer. So, it was in quarter four of a financial fiscal year, so the pressure was on to try to optimize and divert capacity to help still hit our revenue objectives for the year.*

*So, when I learned about crisis management, that's the one that sticks in my head as this first moment in my career where I had to learn how to talk to leaders, I had to learn how to prioritize based on financial commitments, and I had to micromanage and optimize as best as I possibly could, and we hit the goal.”* (Excerpt from the interview with Person 4)

This pattern reflects what Hassan and Jakuula describe as the need for leaders to stay "informed and present" (2024) during disruption. The emotional intelligence required to move quickly from frustration to focused action is a critical leadership competency that allows effective crisis response. The Harvard Business Review's guidance on "leading through uncertainty" (2025) highlights how staying calm, direct, and honest is the best way to lead a transformational and proactive team.

### **Theme 3: The Personal Demands of Crisis**

During crisis there is an expectation of immediate and intensive effort, often requiring leaders to work through their personal time and existing commitments. Due to the instability of the situation, the commitment demanded by crisis is extreme, sometimes requiring leaders to live by the rules: "you didn't go home until you fixed it."

In the automotive industry, if a manufacturing line was shut down, leaders understood this meant they would stay on-site, regardless of how many days it took. One leader talked about a negotiation of critical contracts until 4am and had to be back in the office at 6am. Another leader was required to attend 12 hours of conference calls simultaneously, handling four different critical part shortages for four different presidents. These meetings filled their entire day, leaving no room for problem resolution. From driving all night to make an important meeting to staying out with their crew on a cold night to boost morale, sacrifice was a reigning theme in many conversations.

This level of commitment reflects the theme of forced rapid action from Riggio and Newstead's framework. (2025) Successful resolution demands grit, passion and perseverance to push past mental fatigue. Ultimately, leadership requires compartmentalizing the impacts of a crisis and following up with the team to debrief and give thanks.

**Theme 4: Defining Severity Through Financial and Operational Risk**

When I asked how severe the crises were on a scale of 1-10, 10 being most extreme, crises are consistently rated high (8 to 10 on a 10-point scale). This reflects Hiles' definition of crisis as situations where "the resources required to resolve the situation exceed the available resources" (Hiles, 2015) and Barton's assertion that crisis can "seriously harm the people, reputation, or financial condition of an organization." (Barton, 2009)

The financial stakes were quantified across multiple industries:

<b>Crisis Scenario</b>	<b>Severity Rating</b>	<b>Key Risk/Quantification</b>
Supplier Flood	10/10	Risk of shutting down aerospace operations due to a specific single source supplier being impacted.
Healthcare Key Process Shutdown	8-9/10	Affected process handling of 80% of company revenue.
Internal Data Threat	8.5/10	Risk affecting "upwards of \$10-\$15 million of revenue" during year-end push; customers and stakeholders involved.
Union Strike Threat	9.6/10	Picketing at key location would have shut down operations along an entire rail line.

A manufacturing crisis was quantified by the cost of downtime, calculated at "\$8,200 a minute." One severe supply disruption caused by a hundred-year flood at a supplier was rated a 10/10 and "Could have led to the shutdown of major customers." These quantifications demonstrate what Riggio and Newstead describe as the high consequence dimension of crisis. These are situations with large negative consequences for stakeholders and environments. Increased pressure on

leaders to act decisively is necessary, but a level head can transform operational challenges into stable situations.

### **Theme 5: Timely Response**

Huge losses often show up through money, disrupted processes, or damaged reputation when a crisis hits. The speed of response usually depends on how much revenue is at risk and the likelihood that stakeholders will face negative consequences.

In one major, unexpected breakdown near year-end, a manager described spending long hours searching for any workable solution while trying to keep revenue flowing. They juggled account tracking, constant communication, and fast problem solving. New processes had to be built on the spot, and different teams jumped in quickly so everyone could work together toward a fix.

This theme highlights both the immediate time pressure and the long-term cost of delaying action. The literature's point about having "little time in which to act" (Hiles, 2015) came through clearly in these stories. Leaders couldn't wait for perfect data or schedule time to think. They had to respond in real time, often giving up sleep, personal plans, and normal routines to keep operations moving.

### **Theme 6: Strategic and Cross-Functional Response**

Often, the highest-impact crises are the ones leaders don't foresee. These events have no roadmap, no built-in procedures, and no obvious place to start. Because of that, people described them as messy, ambiguous, and uncomfortable to navigate. This connects directly to the "novelty and ambiguity" theme in the literature, where crises tend to come from unclear causes and require decisions without precedent.

The COVID-19 pandemic came up in almost every interview as the best example of this. Nobody had the processes, technology access, or staffing models needed for a sudden shutdown. Entire buildings closed for weeks. Some employees had to come in because key resources were only accessible on-site, while others tried to figure out whether their systems would even work off the company network. Leaders talked about having to pivot overnight to remote work, often building basic tools from scratch. One operations manager described manually tracking every employee with COVID in a spreadsheet to monitor symptoms and isolation timelines because no processes like that existed before in the organization.

Novel crises weren't limited to the pandemic. One leader talked about getting a call during a critical year-end period: "I got a call from our IT security team saying we think we have an internal threat. Somebody's trying to download sensitive data." The team had never handled anything like that and had to balance investigating the incident, protecting information, and keeping operations moving. Another leader noted that when they had a fire in their plant, their

"crisis management" involved rushing out to extinguish it with buckets of water because immediate action was necessary.

These situations showed how fast organizational silos break down when a real crisis hits. Leaders described pulling in legal, quality, finance, HR, engineering, security teams, and even outside entities like fire departments, police, and competitors. One manager whose supplier was hit by a flood said their team had to "scour the earth" to find parts, sometimes calling aftermarket sellers or even asking competing companies if they had extra inventory.

One leader described the lack of supply for a specialized part, causing a bottleneck in their process. In the end, their CEO publicly shared the product design, "for the greater good," to invite help. The goal of this was to multi-source the part in the near future. Inside the company, nearly every function had to get involved. Government affairs stayed in close contact with federal agencies, sourcing faced impossible lead times, and operations built new workflows almost daily. To keep everyone aligned, managers held standup meetings every morning so that information didn't get lost.

Across these stories, one theme stuck out. Leaders had to bring people together quickly and influence teams they didn't directly manage. They spoke about staying calm, controlling what they could, and giving clear direction even when they didn't have full information. In these high stakes, cross-functional scenarios, leaders must be confident in their message delivery and can "influence without authority." The Harvard Business Review article emphasizes "empowering all stakeholders to contribute to resilience efforts." (2025) This reflects how crises demand broad collaboration and the ability to work with different people and specialties.

### **Theme 7: Root Cause Analysis and Post-Crisis Management**

Once the immediate crisis is handled and the "firefight" settles, leaders face a different kind of pressure. They know they need to shift into prevention mode, but this phase often gets skipped because teams are exhausted or the cost of fixing the issue feels too high. Everyone I spoke with emphasized that if a crisis happened at all, it signals that "something went wrong in the planning process" and should be dealt with to prevent future problems.

As several leaders put it, the real work starts when the dust settles. Organizations must carve out the time, space, and "the money to go back and say, hey, how do we prevent that from actually happening again?" That means slowing down long enough to run a 'five whys' analysis or dig into the root cause, so they aren't relying on people to be heroes all the time.

Many of the preventive strategies they shared are expensive but necessary. Some leaders talked about "dual sourcing our manufacturing sites" to build in-house contingency options. Others mentioned predictable threats, like hurricanes in certain regions, and the need to increase the

safety stock ahead of time. All these actions point toward the same goal, which is designing a system that doesn't collapse every time conditions shift.

The challenge is that preparation isn't free. Building out contingency plans and anticipating dozens of unlikely scenarios drains resources and doesn't always feel practical. Leaders often think about it like an expected-value calculation. They weigh the probability of an event against its potential impact, then decide whether the cost of preparing is worth it. It reflects the broader question of value add. If the same amount of time could help a larger group of people or solve more recurring problems, is it worth spending that time preparing for one rare crisis? Leaders are constantly balancing these tradeoffs.

Another point that came up often is how good crisis management should be invisible from the outside. When operations recover smoothly, external customers "never recognize that there was ever a problem," which puts more weight on internal follow-up. One transportation executive described how, in their industry, seamless service means that their shippers never noticed any disturbance and could continue on-schedule. This is an achievement that deserves acknowledgment because it is a sign of a strong, cross-functional team.

## The Supply Chain in Crisis Leadership

The supply chain incorporates operations, logistics, and procurement into a network of facilities and processes that transform raw materials into final products and deliver them to end-users. The interviews revealed that supply chain leadership in practice is far more complex than this definition suggests. The interviews made it clear that supply chain leadership carries high stakes. Decisions tie directly to financial risk, global coordination, and the push to keep things running while also planning for what's next.

The leaders I spoke with stressed that their jobs go far beyond moving products from point A to point B. One person explained that solving a single issue often means pulling in almost every internal function. Real change requires visibility across the organization and strong leadership to move people in the same direction.

### **Theme 1: Operations - Internal Processes Under Pressure**

Internal operations have a lot of moving parts, and when something disrupts them, the effects can be severe. Several interviewees described situations where regulations or government involvement created operational problems that required fast and creative decision making.

In one aerospace case, a local fire marshal found a code violation and ordered an immediate warehouse shutdown. Millions of dollars of work still needed to be completed, so the company had to act quickly to protect revenue while working with the marshal. They negotiated, increased visibility, and shared their process with emergency services to show how seriously they were taking the issue. Even in the internal data threat example mentioned earlier, the

response required coordination with lawyers, the fire chief (to handle transportation rules), and police. Keeping operations running meant calling in support from multiple functions at once.

Labor relations came up as another major operational challenge. They described both the benefits and tradeoffs: unions protect workers and ensure strikes only occur when concerns are legitimate, but they also limit what leaders can adjust when there's pressure on pay or benefits. Strikes in major locations could lead to millions in lost revenue and a future of negative consequences in labor relations.

*“Railroad strikes are very, very rare. But every once in a while, you do get a strike threat... We made an operating move- we changed where crews were going to report in the state of Ohio, and the union took a position we didn't have a right to move them to that location. We felt very strongly that we had the right.*

*But the union leader decided that his position was strong enough that he said, well, if you do, there will be pickets up at 7am tomorrow morning in Lordstown, Ohio. And in terms of a crisis, I mean, the panic and the worry by the people that were in the operating department, I mean, railroad strike threats were so unusual. It jarred them a little bit. And so we went into action, got ahold of our inside attorneys that were based in Cleveland, and they got in touch with some outside attorney experts. And I got to drive from Baltimore to Cleveland all night.”* (Excerpt from the interview with Person 5)

The literature frames supply chain management as a system built to create value for stakeholders (Shukla et al., 2011), but the interviews made it clear that leaders often do this work while managing outside pressures from regulators, emergency services, and labor groups. The strike threat described above shows how quickly external forces can escalate a situation and push operations off balance. Leaders who can steady their organizations under these conditions, rather than reacting only after the damage hits, are the ones who keep disruptions from becoming full crises.

## **Theme 2: Logistics - Managing Distance, Time, and Uncertainty**

Supply chains involve constant movement with many interdependent parts, so logistics is essential for keeping materials, information, and partners aligned across distance. Organizations rely on updated technology, safe and sufficient transportation, well defined contracts, and strong supplier relationships. People who work in logistics are often responsible for forecasting shipments, both upstream and downstream in the supply chain. There can even be a reverse logistics process in the form of customer returns flowing the opposite direction up the chain.

Forecasting reduces the chance of crisis because it gives a historically data-based view of what may happen next. It can also reveal the root causes of a crisis. Natural disasters are a clear example, and was a topic brought up often by these leaders. One executive described a hundred year flood that hit a key supplier specializing in parts that were hard to source elsewhere. The

company had failed to multi source, so when the flood filled the supplier's warehouse, they could not save the inventory and had to scramble for a substitute.

When normal channels break down, logistics teams turn to unconventional measures to keep materials moving. The same executive described having to uncover any source of a low volume part, even asking competitors if they had extra inventory to sell, "Do you have any extra? Can we buy it from you?" This search sometimes led to paying "10x the price" to aftermarket storefronts to avoid major customer shutdowns. In the most critical cases, when a part was needed to fix a broken product in the field, the cost of logistics skyrocketed with an overnight or same-day express shipment.

The interviews show how fragile the connections between supplier and end-user can be. Distance, transportation risks, and single source dependencies are all examples of risk points that can escalate into major crises requiring emergency response.

**Theme 3: Procurement - Cost Management and Relationship Dynamics** Costs climb fast in a crisis, especially when the situation is unexpected and severe. When operations stall, organizations need enough financial flexibility and strong networks to understand the impact and respond quickly. Tension can also build inside the company and across supplier and distributor relationships. Several interviewees described disputes that pushed buyers to bring certain processes in-house rather than continue outsourcing. Others noted strategic mergers or contract structures designed to secure control over specific parts. These moves show how companies rely on relationships and industry connections to stay competitive and reinforce their operations during uncertain times.

Buying is strategic. Building better relationships with suppliers can seem like solving a problem, but in doing so organizations may be piling up risk because there is greater dependence. Short term signals that say "we are improving things now" can be deceptive because they have long term complications. Procurement experts are in the dark and must make purchasing decisions based on experience, knowledge of the industry and current/past events.

The need for full coverage planning and risk mitigation emerged as a key post-crisis theme, as disruptions are often seen as a failure of foresight. One leader spoke about how ordering too many or too few parts could easily put your job at risk and spark investigation. Purchasing necessitates thorough investigation and forecasting.

After an immediate crisis is solved and the "fire is put out," the focus must shift to Business Continuity Planning (BCP). This includes funding BCP strategies such as dual sourcing suppliers or holding additional safety stock in areas vulnerable to recurring events, such as hurricanes. This connects directly to Hile's emphasis on reduction, readiness, response, and recovery (2015) as the comprehensive approach to crisis management.

#### **Theme 4: The Growth of the Supply Chain**

True vertical integration is where one company once owns its entire supply chain. This could include its own power plant, natural gas wells, water rights, can manufacturing, and glass production to be self-sufficient. Over time, with mergers, the industrial revolution, and the rise of global expansion through technology and political agreements, many of these integrated assets were sold. This pushed companies toward greater reliance on external forces

This shift from internal control to supplier dependence changed the nature of supply chain crisis management. When companies managed everything in-house, disruptions stayed within their walls. With today's global networks, leaders must navigate relationships and dependencies that involve partners they do not directly control. They must still find ways to leverage value in contracts and negotiations. The literature describes this as the ability to "influence without authority," and it has become essential because effective crisis response often relies on suppliers, logistics partners, and other stakeholders outside the organization.

#### **Theme 5: Scarcity and Cross-Functional Support**

The imbalance between supply and demand can be detrimental to an organization. The most famous, recent example of this were the negative effects on inventory from the COVID-19 pandemic. One person described how the entire healthcare industry couldn't get enough rubber gloves or KN95 masks, so prices skyrocketed. Demand kept climbing because healthcare services couldn't shut down. At the same time, managers were pushed into unfamiliar territory, working from home while manually tracking employee illnesses and isolation periods in spreadsheets. The chaos created a scramble for both physical materials and basic information.

There can also be a scarcity of information on a problem, which can impede the process of crisis management and resolution. Many leaders talked about how hard it was to get clear visibility into the problem they were facing. When information is incomplete or scattered, crisis management slows down. Using connections and internal networks becomes essential. Every organization is trying to improve visibility so they can spot bottlenecks before they grow into something more damaging. One of the questions I asked each interviewee was, "Did you involve specific people or specific resources to work through these situations?" Many talked openly about going to higher-ups, leaning on coworkers, or involving outside experts because they simply couldn't solve the issue alone. Asking for help can be uncomfortable, but it was a defining part of their responses. It was a lesson in humility and trust between teams.

Crisis response often becomes a whole-company effort. Internal teams across finance, operations, engineering, procurement, HR, and safety get pulled in so leaders can see the issue from every angle. External coordination also occurs, such as hiring lawyers, getting police and emergency services involved, and even sometimes involving competitors when specific parts become scarce.

This kind of cross collaboration lines up with what the literature emphasizes about effective crisis management. Barton notes that crises cannot be solved in silos and require "Cross-functional teams to delegate and solve issues." (Barton, 2009) The interviews showed the same pattern. When resources are scarce, information is incomplete, or demand is overwhelming, strong communication and broad support networks become the only way to keep operations going.

### **Theme 6: Building Sustainable Processes**

Supply chain leadership is characterized by the challenge of balancing competing priorities. A manager's daily focus is split between short-term operational demands, such as achieving quarterly goals like backorder reduction, and long-term strategic targets, such as managing overall inventory and budget goals. Their job is to present options and impacts so decisions can be made, not simply point out what is going wrong.

This tension between firefighting and planning came up in most interviews. Leaders talked about being pulled into crisis mode, where downtime costs thousands of dollars a minute and sourcing efforts become urgent, widespread searches. They still had to keep negotiations moving and operations steady, even while working on putting out other fires. At the same time, they were aware that long-term work, like prevention and contingency planning, could not fall behind, even if it is viewed as "a drain on resources and a level of waste that may not be rational."

How much should be invested in preparing for low-probability but high-consequence events? Hile's RRRR framework (Reduction, Readiness, Response, Recovery) provides a structure for this balance, but the interviewee's stories showed how hard it is to divide time and money across these areas when daily operational needs absorb so much attention.

## **Leadership in Supply Chain Crisis**

Leaders whose focus is to support an organization through crisis are present in almost every organization. These people are highly trusted, reliable workers who will fully investigate an issue from the moment a crisis hits through to the end by sharing their reflections and discoveries with others.

### **Theme 1: Defining Leadership Through Action**

Leadership is defined as the ability to inspire and guide others toward a shared goal through trust, communication, adaptability, and emotional intelligence, especially when navigating uncertainty or crisis. The interviews showed that across industries, leadership is defined less by title and more by action. Leaders are individuals who push themselves when they are needed most and bring a level of empathy and clarity that help others keep moving.

The distinction between leader and manager is that leaders step up to be there for their team and are not afraid to get their hands dirty. Interviewees shared how, "real leaders will get out of bed" during a major storm or derailment and will show up in-person to support. This presence shows commitment to the team, which "means so much to those people that work for you." One leader emphasized the philosophy of, "if you're going to sink your ship, you're the first one that says this thing's got a leak." The attitude of stepping up and taking responsibility instead of delegating blame sets a leader apart.

This aligns with what the literature describes as transformational leadership—the capacity to "inspire people to voluntarily work toward a common objective." (Hassan et al., 2024) The goal for a senior director is not just to be seen as a leader, but as someone who is "developing other people to be leaders." This developmental focus connects directly to what Proches and Singh describe as leadership that "empowers all stakeholders to contribute to resilience efforts." (2023)

This reflects what the literature calls transformational leadership, the ability to "inspire people to voluntarily work toward a common objective." (Hassan et al., 2024) One senior director said their goal is not only to lead, but to develop others into leaders as well. That perspective aligns with the belief that strong leadership empowers everyone to contribute to resilience efforts.

## **Theme 2: Servant Leadership**

Many experienced leaders described a leadership style rooted in humility and a willingness to show up for their people. Good leadership means standing with your team, listening, and trying to understand everyone's perspective. Two interviewees talked about being outside with their crews during tough situations and in harsh weather. Even if their positions didn't allow them to do the physical work, their teams could see them there. Their presence made them appear a pillar of support to the crew.

One long-time leader described his approach as servant leadership, always looking for ways to help. During major events, like a fire that broke out in the plant, he didn't wait to be asked. He stepped in immediately:

*"Your style really doesn't change. If it does, then you're probably losing yourself. You know, they always say, be careful how you act on the way up the ladder, because those that you step on their hands may be passing you on the way while you're coming back down the ladder. So, I always had a servant leadership style. Engagement, tell me where I'm wrong, help me get better, how can I help you?"*

*So, I would always jump in... I was running part of a plant, and we had a fire. So, what do you do? You go out where the fire is, and you get in line with buckets, and you put it out. I was out there and they're like, what are you doing? I'm like, just because I got a white shirt and a tie on, I'm handing water. Let's go and get this fire out." (Excerpt from the interview with Person 1)*

This leader knew that the consequences would be worse if the fire spread, so he quickly put aside pride to face the problem at hand. A key piece of advice is to "outwork everybody" and treat people "very respectfully, like you want to be treated."

At the same time, leaders talked about the fine line between being supportive and losing balance with the team. If the relationship feels uneven, tensions rise. Effective crisis leadership requires both presence and authority, along with the judgment to know when each is needed.

### **Theme 3: Maintaining Composure**

In crisis, one of the most important responsibilities of a leader is providing emotional stability for the team. That often means separating internal worry from the way they present themselves. Several people talked about the need to "control the controllables" when things go wrong. Staying calm is a test of discipline. A leader must "set the tone" and be "rock solid," in every situation to set precedence and keep their team aligned.

Leaders admitted they often feel "fear and worry" on the inside. They know a problem is "going to suck your time up" and create process setbacks. Even so, they rely on keeping a "very good poker face" because fear spreads quickly. Being "choiceful with your words" and intentional with how you communicate is key for your team to understand the gravity of a situation without panicking. Many leaders struggle with the weight of this responsibility.

This reflects the themes of staying calm, clear, and honest to create stability during uncertainty. Transparency matters, but the interviews showed that it needs balance. Leaders cannot freely unload their own anxieties onto their teams without consequences. They also cannot pretend everything is fine. The challenge is staying honest while still projecting confidence that the situation can be handled.

### **Theme 4: Delegation and Development**

Effective leadership depends on building a strong team that can operate confidently and independently. A common mistake is being afraid to delegate. Leaders must "delegate regularly so that you're comfortable with it as a leader, and so the team becomes "familiar with being given delegated duties." The role of a leader is to "prepare the people in your team to be as good as you are, hopefully better than you are, and for them to eventually do your role."

A leader should feel proud, not threatened, when the team runs smoothly in their absence. One leader described the feeling of giving full ownership of a major project to a direct report. They described how the gesture was a representation of "full faith and trust." Subsequently, this was a mentoring opportunity for the direct report, and they continued to showcase their skills without the threat of micromanagement.

This developmental approach matters during crises. When disruptions hit, leaders who have invested in capable teams can delegate quickly and focus on coordinating the bigger picture.

This practice decreases bottlenecks because responsibility is spread out and allows the entire team to be involved in decision making.

### **Theme 5: Utilizing Cross-Functional Resources**

In large, complex crises, leaders often need to motivate and coordinate people across teams and organizations without relying on official authority alone. A leader must be confident and able to "influence without authority." Making connections and helping others is incredibly significant for an organization to rally and prioritize issues.

One leader described a rail crisis where a major location fell 7,000 vehicles behind because they didn't have enough rail cars to move inventory. In the end, the situation forced them to request help from customer rail carpool members. Every rail car in the region had to be diverted and moved because they were told "the Pope will be there on the hill next week." The leader explained that the rail community responded because of the trust they had developed over years of working together.

*"We were significantly far behind... there was insufficient rail cars, and we had one point in particular, which is the largest bi-level plant in North America... and we were 7,000 vehicles behind, and I got the call that said the Pope will be there on the hill next week, and we have to clear out all the vehicles before the Pope shows up... You ran a pool of common rail cars for the benefit of all customers, and in this case, you had to run all of your cars to one customer at one location, and that created a lot of issues amongst the other people. So, you might solve one crisis here, but you create multiple crises elsewhere.*

*So, it was very difficult... A lot of cooperation, though, I have to say, between the other people. When you tell them the Pope's going to show up, and that's why you're doing it, they tend to respond accordingly." (Excerpt from the interview with Person 6)*

This kind of influence relies on credibility built over time. Leaders who communicate clearly, think creatively, and stay calm in uncertainty gain the trust needed to move people toward solutions, even when they do not have direct control over them.

### **Theme 6: Effective Communication**

Nonverbal communication plays a bigger role than many expect. An example of this may be how sitting back and appearing open with shoulders and arms signals relaxed engagement, while intentional head movement and eye contact can show high engagement. Body language is a signal to others on how someone is truly feeling. Leaders are responsible for communicating in every way that they care about their team and have the confidence to represent them. Showing you are listening is sometimes more important than speaking.

The literature often highlights "clear communication" as the differentiator between companies that recover and those that do not. The interviews showed that an openness to learn is only one piece. Communicating with intent and showing respect is key for dealing with high-pressure

conversations such as working with stakeholder groups such as unions. The blend of presence and empathy is what makes communication effective in crisis.

### **Theme 7: Crisis Prevention Advocacy**

If a team is constantly "acting the hero," then something is wrong in the internal process. A true crisis is not supposed to be a daily occurrence. It should be a significant event with a clear catalyst and a process improvement follow-up. Discovering the root cause of the problem is necessary for future improvements and crisis prevention. When these issues are initially discovered, it is the duty of a leader to bring enough attention and resources to solve the issue and prevent future negative consequences.

Budget limits often complicate response and prevention. Leaders, commonly in large organizations, must work hard to advocate for resources, whether that means pushing for monetary investment or making the case for more team involvement. This role connects to the idea of Business Continuity Planning, which stresses the importance of investing in "reduction" and "readiness" rather than focusing only on response and recovery. (Hiles, 2015)

### **Theme 8: Organic Mentorship**

It is quite common for businesses to provide a formal mentorship program for their employees. Unfortunately, these relationships are not formed naturally, and many leaders spoke about discovering the most meaningful mentorship relationships through natural connection. One leader who felt strongly on this point described official programs as "not worth a hill of beans," because of the lack of building a real relationship. There must be a "give and take" and a natural spark between two people.

Much of the learning between mentor and mentee happens through unconscious intake of information. Like reading body language and mirroring it naturally to make a good impression, the mentee grows by paying attention, watching how senior leaders navigate problems, communicate, and carry themselves. These informal relationships often end up shaping careers more than structured programs ever could. One leader described the most rewarding part of their career as building a personal "board of advisors" and seeing the people they mentored go on to succeed in their own roles.

Qualities like emotional intelligence, strategic thinking, and sound judgment cannot be taught through official business tracks. They are learned through real situations and real relationships, which is exactly how successful leaders describe their own growth.

# Conclusion

## **The Intersection of Crisis, Supply Chain, and Leadership**

This research examined how crisis, supply chain, and leadership interact. Through interviews and a review of academic work, I found that these dimensions are closely linked in practice and share consistent patterns across industries.

Crisis in supply chain contexts is characterized by seven defining features: inevitable disruption, initial emotional demands, extreme personal commitment, severe financial risk, time pressure, strategic cross-functional response, and the post-crisis management for future prevention.

Supply chain operations emerged as vulnerable systems where distance, dependencies, and complexity create continuous crisis potential across operations, logistics, and procurement. As supply chains have grown and evolved, the way teams support each other and maintain sustainable processes has shifted as well.

Leadership in a business context has eight main themes: action over title, servant leadership, emotional composure, team delegation, cross-functional influence, effective communication, prevention advocacy, and organic mentorship.

What became clear through these stories is that effective crisis management in supply chains is about having leaders who can work independently towards a common goal, maintain operational continuity under pressure and disruption, and transform discoveries of root problems into preventative measures and long-term learning.

## **The Supply Chain That Enters Crisis Is Not the One That Emerges**

A central discovery from this research is that crisis transforms supply chain structures and relationships. Leaders explained how disruption reveals hidden vulnerabilities, including single source dependencies that turn into major bottlenecks, vertical manufacturing systems that limit the flexibility gained from outsourcing, and partnerships built mainly on profit that can collapse quickly and trigger broader disruption.

The supply chain that enters a crisis is built on assumptions. These may include stable processes, predictable forecasts, and an already optimized operation. The supply chain that comes out the other side is often reconfigured based on what failed. This is not necessarily negative. New processes tend to be stronger, additional procedures are put in place, and cracks in the organization become visible and can be addressed.

A common outcome after a crisis is a shift from a primarily efficiency-focused mindset to one centered on resilience. The goal is not to eliminate all crises. It is to build systems and teams that can handle them.

**The Human Aspect: The Importance of Leadership in a Supply Chain Crisis** The interviews revealed that leadership determines whether crisis leads to organizational collapse or growth. The leaders who successfully navigated disruption moved rapidly from initial frustration to focused action, maintained external composure while handling internal stress, made high-stakes decisions with incomplete information, mobilized cross-functional teams, communicated with clarity and empathy, and balanced immediate problem-solving with longer term prevention.

What set these leaders apart was not technical mastery or formal authority. It was their ability to control the controllables and direct their focus toward practical, actionable steps instead of becoming paralyzed when the solutions were unclear. They understood that during disruption, their role was less about having all the answers and more about providing direction and stability in their team. This approach gave their teams confidence to contribute and learn from the situation.

The emotional intelligence, a servant leadership skillset, and the "very good poker face," is what transforms an organization and increases resiliency. Furthermore, genuine mentorship appears while watching how experienced leaders handle pressure, make tradeoffs, and maintain trust. These stories reinforce that crisis leadership cannot be captured through simple hypotheticals. It is developed through experience, strong relationships, and the willingness to stand with a team when everything feels unstable.

### **Lessons Learned: Preparing for the Unpredictable**

The process of putting together this thesis has taught me many key lessons regarding supply chain crisis management. These points highlight several foundational ideas for supply chain professionals and organizations preparing for future disruptions.

1. Crisis happens in every industry and brings negative consequences that can spread quickly through the globally connected supply chains businesses rely on today. Leaders need to build a strong mindset in their teams for them to handle unfamiliar and difficult situations.
2. A major test of resilience for a leader comes in the first moments after learning about a crisis. Fear, frustration, exhaustion, and confusion are normal reactions. Choosing to take on the problem and stay calm determines the trajectory of team morale and sets the tone for crisis management response.
3. Resilience requires preparation. This includes saving emergency funds, building strong relationships, and regularly checking the health of processes to prevent problems from becoming larger fires.
4. The post-crisis phase is often as important as the initial response. When a process fails, it can be tempting to fix the immediate issue and move on. A full root-cause analysis, along with reflection on what worked and what didn't, is necessary to prevent future

disruptions. Organizations that fail to do this risk repeating the same crises, relying on people to "be heroes all the time" rather than building systems that can withstand disruption.

5. Future supply chain leaders need to understand that their primary role goes beyond optimizing material and information flows. Their job is to coordinate human capabilities across different parts of the organization. By listening and having an empathetic skillset, leaders develop the ability to influence without authority, communicate under uncertainty, delegate systematically, and maintain the composure to turn each crisis into meaningful organizational learning.

As leader 4 said, if a crisis means "something went wrong in the planning process," then each disruption is both a failure and an opportunity to rebuild stronger, more resilient, and better prepared for the inevitable next crisis. The leaders who embrace this continuous cycle of disruption, response, learning, and adaptation will navigate future crises successfully and will build organizations capable of thriving in an increasingly changing, uncertain, and complex world.

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