



# Crisis Management

Lessons from the  
military

Lecture by Tom Middendorp,  
Former Chief of Defense,  
The Netherlands

# Maintaining trust in uncertain times

Recently [Avida International](#) organised a webinar featuring Tom Middendorp, former Chief of Defense of the Netherlands. His views on crisis management contain valuable lessons for managers looking for solid advice:

## **Our worlds are similar**

A crisis is characterised by a high degree of unpredictability and produces an often disruptive effect, caused by external factors that are difficult to influence. It affects every part of your organisation and each segment of your value chain. Your partners, suppliers and stakeholders are similarly impacted and set their own priorities, with their own consequences. The safety of your employees is at stake, as is the survival of your organisation. All this results in increasing emotions and a growing pressure on managers in particular.



How should you deal with this? How can you reduce such stress and uncertainty? How can you keep your people motivated in such an environment? How can you join forces with stakeholders and partners for your mutual benefit? Which priorities should you set and what do you base these on? These are questions a military commander in a crisis situation also struggles with. For the past 10 years I have been involved in crisis management on a daily basis and in recent months I have shared my experiences with hundreds of companies and organisations. And what I hear is that many of those experiences can also be applied in business. The following are some lessons on how to be a leader in crisis circumstances and how to organise this in your company.

## About leadership in a crisis

We are all experienced and successful leaders. Only now we have ended up in a different game with different rules. This creates doubt and uncertainty about the course to be followed, putting intense pressure on our shoulders. Too much caution or too much determination can prevent us from finding the right solutions. We must be curious and open-minded in finding new ways to handle the situation in front of us. This is only possible if we bring forward different aspects of our leadership. But, first of all it is important to be visible, to exude a sense of calm, and to take the reins into your own hands. Ultimately, leadership is about building trust, internally and externally. And in times of crisis, the following three elements are important:

1

### Give focus

Your organisation is working overtime and people are overloaded. Therefore it is crucial that you **prioritise and give direction**. Focus on the top 20% of actions that determine 80% of your return. Do not micro-manage, but use the strength of your organisation and of your partners to focus on the effects you want to achieve (WHAT) and explain why they are important (WHY).

2

### Empower your people

This enables your people to find the optimal solution within their own area of responsibility. Depending on their competencies, it is important to make maximum use of their knowledge and experience to complete the "HOW". That does require that they have the **framework and mandate** they need to be successful. It also requires you to set achievable goals. Their success is your success.

3

### Make it a team effort

As a leader you work in different teams: above you, below you and next to you. You have to work on mutual trust in all of these teams. That requires investing in the relationships and making sure you understand each other. Common interests unify teams, and mutual understanding makes it possible to complement each other and create win-win situations. **But to re-emphasise, a crisis situation is a different game with different rules, and it may be necessary to adjust your team and place different players in the foreground..**



# How do you organise that?

"This all sounds very logical, but how do you do that? How do you provide direction when faced with incomplete information? How can I motivate people if I don't know what message to convey?"

**You will need to develop your 'crisis capability' with the help of experiences from the military world:**

## 1 Adjust your information provision to the new reality

In times of crisis, requirements for information change, and regular information systems often fail to help us make the right decisions. Focus information provision on the core questions you need answers to. These are likely to include questions about economic scenarios, recovery plans, government measures, the possibilities / limitations of your partners, for example.

Then use your networks to answer those core questions as comprehensively as possible. This will produce a lot of data, so watch out for overkill. In the military domain, we create a **separate information cell** for this purpose that collects the data, then validates and translates it into information, or in other words, into answers to the core questions. In this way they provide a clear, up-to-date and collective picture of the crisis situation (situational awareness).

But an up-to-date picture is not quite enough to become proactive. For that to happen it is important to understand the underlying dynamics of the crisis and to be able to assess how it will develop. Within defence, we have a type of Chief Risk Officer who translates the information into the most-likely and most-dangerous risk **scenarios for the short, medium and long term**. These scenarios form an important basis for the development and stress testing of potential courses of action.



## 2

## Separate planning from execution

How do you ensure that you can continually anticipate, that you can become proactive and that you can give direction to implementation (WHAT and WHY)? To this end, it is advisable to set up a **multifunctional planning team** that, based on the information generated and the risk scenarios you created, explores and develops courses of action, again for the long, medium and short term. This team should be able to consult experts within and outside the organisation. It is advisable to also involve your partners in the plan development, so that it becomes a broader and more integrated team effort and there are no unforeseen surprises.

*"In crisis situations we tend to communicate less because so many things are uncertain, whilst the reverse is what is really required."*

## 3

## Communicate more than ever

In crisis situations we tend to communicate less because so many things are uncertain, whilst the reverse is what is really required. The less people know, the more worried they become, which also affects trust in the leadership. Therefore, it's important to communicate more. This increases your visibility and keeps everyone involved. It is important not to paint too rosy a picture. Also, do not limit communication to what you know for certain. A clear explanation of the problem and how you are dealing with it provides shared understanding and prevents false expectations. You can also communicate which decisions were made and how your departments are dealing with them. Best practices provide energy and reinforce belief. Daily situation reports help line management in their communication. A list of key messages and a list of FAQs are also useful as they help the organisation speak with one voice.

# Avida International's crisis management workshops

Avida International and Strategia have created a crisis management workshop that deals with some very topical potential crises geared to the '**work from home**' situation.

Your team will be more aware of potential crises, and have the opportunity to mitigate these crises before they occur. It also serves as a team building and bonding exercise -- especially important in the current WFH environment. The workshop can be adapted to your needs, for instance, external providers can be included.

For more information [click here](#).



## Tom Middendorp

Avida International is indebted to Tom Middendorp, retired general of the Royal Netherlands Army.

Tom served as Chief of Defence of the Armed forces of the Netherlands until 2017. He previously served as the Commander of Task Force Uruzgan, part of the International Security Assistance Force (IFAS).

## Contact us



[www.avidaint.com](http://www.avidaint.com)



UK: +44 203 637 5759

NL: +31 20 737 1047

DE: +49 89 205 008 5020



[info@avidaint.com](mailto:info@avidaint.com)

