Introducing Relational Leadership

By Dr Mark Crosweller AFSM

Leadership in crisis is often cast as the work of bold, steady figures who step forward in moments of chaos, offering direction, confidence, and protection. But in today's world—where climate risks keep accelerating, crises overlap, and disasters more frequently push beyond our capacity to manage them—this traditional image simply isn't enough. Add to that the growing pressure on citizens to be endlessly "resilient" and on leaders to project invulnerability, and we find ourselves in a leadership landscape full of strain, contradiction, and moral fatigue. What we need now is something deeper and more human: a relational way of leading that rests on ethics, interdependence, and a greater appreciation of vulnerability, loss, and our shared human experience.

The Necessary Turn Toward Ethical Leadership

Before anything else, leadership rests on ethics. Ethics holds together the social fabric—it's what enables trust, cooperation, and the resilience of whole communities. Without ethical grounding, leadership collapses into self-interest, competition, and fragmentation. In disaster management, where decisions can affect lives in real time, ethics isn't an optional extra; it is the very ground we stand on.

Across the literature, we find a wide range of ethical guides for crisis leadership. The Council of Europe, for instance, highlights solidarity, humanity, impartiality, and cooperation as fundamental principles for protecting people through all stages of disaster. Researchers and practitioners add to this list: prudence, vigilance, justice, the courage to speak truthfully, authenticity, clear communication, and a willingness to make firm decisions when they matter most. Ethics and community engagement go hand-in-hand—they form the backbone of responsible disaster leadership.

But ethics alone doesn't shield us from the realities of leading in crises. Increasingly severe disasters bring ethical dilemmas that aren't neatly covered by established frameworks. As leaders, we face competing priorities, limited resources, shifting information, and pressures coming from every direction. Ethical leadership cannot be fixed or formulaic; it must evolve as crises evolve, remaining flexible, relational, and alive to complexity.

Tensions in Ethical Theory

Leading ethically also means navigating four influential ethical positions—ethical egoism, relativism,

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absolutism, and pluralism—each of which shapes how we understand right action.

Ethical egoism says that individuals should prioritise their own interests. Self-care is certainly essential—no leader can act well if they're depleted or unsafe—but leaning too far into self-interest can lead to harmful decisions, especially when the vulnerable rely on us. When egoism dominates leadership, it can justify actions that benefit individuals or organisations at the expense of the public good.

Ethical relativism suggests that what's "right" depends entirely on cultural or contextual norms. This perspective values diversity, but it also poses a huge problem for crisis leadership. If each culture or group decides what counts as moral, how do leaders make decisions that must apply fairly across different communities? How do we uphold shared standards, like human rights or equitable access to resources, if everything is relative?

Ethical absolutism claims that universal moral principles apply everywhere and at all times. This provides clarity and consistency, but it risks imposing one group's values on others or overlooking the lived realities of marginalised communities. Even universal ideals—honesty, compassion, justice—can show up differently depending on cultural histories or social contexts.

Ethical pluralism sits in the middle ground. It recognises that multiple moral principles can be valid at once, even when they conflict. Instead of insisting on one fixed truth, pluralism encourages us to weigh duties carefully, listen deeply, and navigate tensions through dialogue and shared reasoning. For leaders who must constantly make trade-offs under pressure, pluralism offers a realistic and humane approach.

Taken together, these ethical theories reveal the moral terrain leaders must walk—an environment of complexity rather than certainty, in which rigid ideological positions rarely help.

Navigating Law and Ethics: Nomos and Physis

Alongside ethical tensions, leaders must also balance the demands of the law (nomos) with broader moral understandings (physis). Laws are formal, codified rules that set boundaries for behaviour. Ethics, meanwhile, come from values, conscience, and lived experience. In disasters, laws sometimes lag behind reality or even restrict leaders from doing what they judge to be right. When that happens, ethics—not legal compliance—must guide action.

The ancient Greek tension between nomos and physis reminds us that human-made laws can never fully capture the moral complexities of life. As climate change reshapes the world and as social–ecological systems become more fragile, leaders must be willing to question whether existing laws still serve the greater good. Ethical crisis leadership sometimes requires stepping beyond narrow legalism to honour deeper truths about vulnerability, interconnectedness, and justice.

Relational Leadership Ethics: A Transformative Perspective

Relational leadership ethics offers a more grounded, human, and context-aware way of understanding leadership. It rejects the idea that leadership lives inside the qualities of a single individual. Instead, leadership becomes something created in relationship—in the ongoing exchanges between people, in shared meaning-making, and in the dialogue that connects us to one another.

Relational leadership is built on several core ideas:

We live in interdependence with others.

Meaning emerges through dialogue and shared experience.

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Ethical responsibility includes working through disagreements, not avoiding them.
Practical wisdom—born from experience and reflection—matters more than rigid rules.
In this perspective, leadership and relationship are inseparable. Leaders and followers shape each other, constantly and mutually. Ethical action grows out of attentiveness to relationships rather than reliance on heroic individualism.

Relational Ethics Across Cultures and Traditions

There are a rich variety of philosophical traditions that share relational ethics at their core—environmental thought, Buddhism, Confucianism, virtue ethics, feminist care ethics, and multispecies justice theory. Each adds depth to the relational leadership approach.
Buddhist ethics foregrounds compassion rooted in interdependence. All beings, human or non-human, experience suffering, and none of that suffering is deserved. Compassion becomes a fundamental moral response, recognising that harm to others eventually harms us, too.
Virtue ethics, especially in MacIntyre's view, treats life as a narrative. Leaders are characters in an unfolding story, continually shaping and being shaped by their communities. Acting with virtue—courage, justice, compassion, humility, care—becomes a lifelong practice cultivated through relationships.
Multispecies justice widens our circle of ethical concern to include non-human beings. It recognises shared vulnerability and insists on our responsibility not to harm others who cannot easily protect themselves. It reminds leaders that ecological justice is inseparable from human justice.
Feminist care ethics and vulnerability theory focus on our embeddedness within networks of care. They challenge leadership models built on hierarchy, power, and detachment, instead emphasising empathy, responsiveness, mutuality, and the everyday realities of lived experience. Leaders in this tradition have obligations to support those who are vulnerable, resist exploitation, and build cultures of dignity and trust.
These traditions together form a strong foundation for a more compassionate, inclusive, and wise leadership practice—one well-suited to the moral challenges of disaster management.

From Critique to Possibility: Advancing Relational Leadership

Drawing all these strands together calls for a more transformative approach to leadership. As disasters intensify, we must let go of outdated narratives that praise invulnerability, self-reliance, and technical mastery above all else. Instead, leaders must recognise vulnerability—our own and others'—as a source of connection, humility, and moral clarity. Vulnerability is not a flaw; it is the foundation of ethical action.
We also need to rethink the myth of the endlessly "resilient citizen." This myth shifts too much responsibility onto individuals while masking systemic inequities and failures. Relational leadership asks us to embrace shared responsibility, create space for community voices, and work collaboratively across power differences.
Jacinda Ardern's response to the Christchurch shootings offers a powerful example of what relational leadership looks like in practice. Her empathy, integrity, and grounded presence demonstrated that compassionate leadership can be both emotionally resonant and politically effective. It showed the world what's possible when leaders act from connection rather than distance.

The Leadership Challenge Ahead

This brings us to a difficult but necessary question: what holds leaders back from adopting relational ethics

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more fully? Neoliberal pressures, institutional expectations, fears of appearing vulnerable, and long-standing power structures all play a role. To move forward, leaders must be willing to examine how these influences shape their thinking and behaviour.

Relational leadership is not just one option among many—it is increasingly essential in a world defined by uncertainty, interdependence, and existential risk. It prepares leaders to challenge harmful narratives, reshape policies, and support communities in ways that honour dignity, equity, and mutual care.

Ultimately, relational leadership offers a path toward communities that are not just resilient but compassionate—communities where vulnerability is acknowledged, supported, and shared rather than hidden, punished, or used as a tool of exclusion.

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