

Practicing Change Series

**Tod  
Bolsinger**

Foreword by Marty Linsky

**How  
Not to  
Waste  
a Crisis**

**Quit  
Trying  
Harder**

Illustrated by  
Mark Demel



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## FOREWORD BY MARTY LINSKY

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I am writing this flying home to New York after four days in Los Angeles with my fifty-two-year-old son, Sam, and his wife, son, and mother-in-law.

The weekend ended with a long unplanned, intimate conversation between Sam and me in front of a fireplace in the lobby of my hotel. Without naming it, we talked about what we both needed to do in this last chapter of my life to enrich our already deep relationship and make the best use of whatever time we have left together.

I experienced it as a hard, complicated, important, and generative conversation, requiring us each to voice and then try to let go of perspectives and assumptions—“truths” that we were inured to and had worked for us. We agreed to individually abandon some habituated ways of thinking and being, and to experiment with some new behaviors.

Then I read Tod Bolsinger’s *How Not to Waste a Crisis*.

Sam and I were modeling the very process Tod describes.

Tod brings a spiritual anchor and a lifetime of addressing concrete problems to the connective work of applying the tools and frameworks of adaptive leadership to the vagaries

of everyday personal and professional life, especially relevant in times characterized by constant, rapid change.

No matter who you are, where you are, how you spend your days, or how old you are, Tod Bolsinger's practical guidance and probing reflective ques-

tions are a vehicle for you and your organization, family, or community to get off the dance floor, get on the balcony, bring a new perspective to the challenges and opportunities in front of you, and begin to make more progress than you have in the past in closing the gap between your most noble aspirations and your current reality.

He has given us a gift. I am already a beneficiary.



## ABOUT THE PRACTICING CHANGE SERIES

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The **Practicing Change** books are about learning skills for leading in a time of deep disruption and change. Together, through them all, we will learn to recognize and then reset our leadership skills for a world that is constantly being upset and reset.

First, we will learn to see the out-of-date habits that have been cultivated through our successes. Then, we will work on new skills necessary for leading in times of change. Those new skills will enable us to embody a different form of leadership—what is called “adaptive leadership.”

Adaptive leadership, as developed by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, is an approach to organizational problems that is needed when your old best practices no longer work. Adaptive leadership starts with diagnosis: Is this problem something that our expertise can solve or not? Is this something that requires us to apply a solution that already exists, or does it fall outside of our current knowledge and ability? Will it require learning and making really hard no-win choices?<sup>1</sup> As we shall repeatedly see, developing adaptive capacity—



that is, the capacity to apply and adapt an organization's most sacred core values so that its mission will thrive in this new environment—is the greatest challenge of leadership.<sup>2</sup>

Most communities are hardwired to resist this kind of adaptation. They believe that survival means reinforcing the way we have always done things in the past. The result is that instead of undergoing transformation in order to be more effective in their mission to serve the world, organizations unconsciously reinforce the very status quo that is not working.

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Schools want to attract students to maintain the faculty who have come to do research within the safety of tenure and the resources of an academic community. A nonprofit's work that was once an innovative solution to a real problem becomes, after a time, an institution whose own survival is now the core purpose for being. In order to restore their flagging attendance or lagging donations, churches double down on the programs that people have historically loved most and will fill the facilities that they invested in building. And established businesses get disrupted by upstart

startups while they are busy picking out new furniture for a bigger corporate office.

When a changing world or changing needs require an organization, institution, or company to itself change in order to keep being relevant to the challenges that are arising around them, it becomes clear that the internal organizational transformation needed—and the losses that must be faced—is an even more difficult leadership challenge than the external reason for changing.

This requires learning a new set of leadership practices.

In these four books (*How Not to Waste a Crisis*, *The Mission Always Wins*, *Leading Through Resistance*, and *Invest in Transformation*) we are going to reexamine four “mindsets” that have resulted in bad habits for most leaders. We’ll take on one of them through each book:

1. Trying harder at what has been successful in the past
2. Focusing on pleasing our historical stakeholders
3. Doing whatever we can to eliminate resistance
4. Confusing trust with transformation

These mindsets are so ingrained within most leaders that they are usually never questioned. Shouldn’t we work hard, take care of our most loyal members, manage resistance to change, and be trustworthy?

Yes. But also no. Not primarily.

Your primary work as a leader is to develop your own capacity to lead your people through the transformation necessary to face the challenges of a changing world.

And that takes practice. Lots of practice. Hours of deliberate practice.

Feel free to read these books in any order, starting with the “old mindset” that is most familiar or potentially most challenging for you. In each book, we will start with a problem area, and then instead of trying to learn a new intellectual concept, we’ll focus instead on a new *skill*—trusting that the new skill will help us both see and think differently.<sup>3</sup> If we can keep practicing the new skill (and reinforcing the new insight), eventually we’ll develop new habits that will become second nature.

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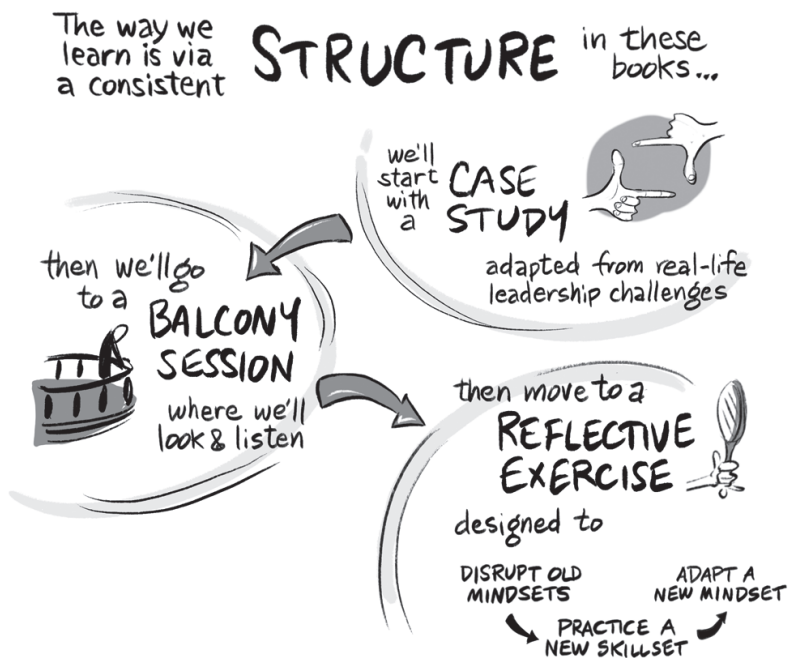
The pattern that we will use in these books will be the same. We will start with a case study adapted from real-life leadership challenges.<sup>4</sup> After the case study (and throughout the book) we will pause and engage in some



reflective exercises that are very similar to the kinds of coaching conversations that my team and I have with leaders all over the world.

These are called “balcony sessions.”<sup>5</sup>

While the “dance floor” is where the action is, the “balcony” is where leaders try to get some larger perspective amid the swirl of the challenges in front of them, decisions foisted on them, opinions and desires of everyone around them, and even their own conflicting internal feelings.<sup>6</sup> Good leaders



learn how to toggle back and forth between “listening on the dance floor” and “looking from the balcony” and begin to see a different way of approaching a new challenge.

After the first balcony session, we will proceed through a reflective-practice learning process:

1. Disrupting an old mindset (which leads to)
2. Practicing a new skillset (which leads to)
3. Embodying an adaptive reset (a new habit for adaptive leadership)

The Practicing Change books—and the process that they teach us—are the ultimate survival guide for leaders in chaos. Together we unlearn bad habits, master adaptive skills, and embrace a leadership style that offers genuine change and transformation—to our people and ourselves.

# INTRODUCTION

## HUMBLING LESSONS FOR EXPERIENCED LEADERS

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*It was a hard and humbling experience.*

Two years ago, I decided to get some instructional help for my downhill skiing. I'd gotten similar assistance in the past with fly-fishing, and, in one day, with my guide's constant whispering in my ear, we broke down and remade my entire approach to fly-fishing. Instead of skiing with a guide, however, I tried out a new app-based skiing training device that measures your technique from sensors in boot insoles. And I had a similar hard and humbling experience. Even though I have been skiing for decades and can often make my way down "expert" runs, the training app continually gave me scores that were far below my own perceived abilities.

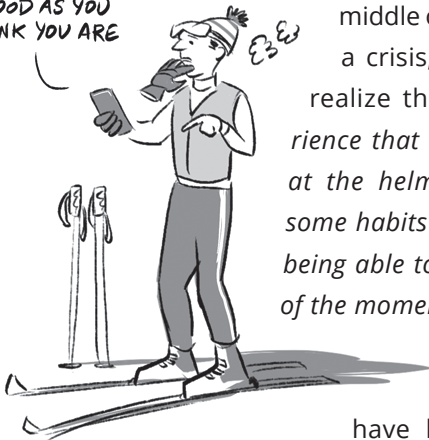
After using the training app for a few days, it became clear to me that my skiing was the same as my fishing. Even though I am by most measures an advanced or "expert" skier, I probably hadn't really improved my skills in a long time. I have years of experience—including a lot of adrenaline-fueled, exhilarating days—that have reinforced a *lot* of bad habits. What I quickly realized is that if I wanted to become a better skier,



then I needed some very direct, targeted coaching on some very specific skills. Again, hard and humbling.

For many leaders, especially the kinds of leaders who are asked to take on challenging companies, organizations, or congregations that are in the middle of change or weathering a crisis, it can be daunting to realize that *the very same experience that makes people trust you at the helm may have reinforced some habits that will keep you from being able to take on the challenges of the moment.*

YOU'RE NOT AS  
GOOD AS YOU  
THINK YOU ARE



This is what many of us serving in leadership have been learning for the past twenty years as the culture around us has changed and as one crisis after another has tested the mettle of our leadership skills.

In the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, I heard a whisper for the first time. It was from a pastor who was deeply discouraged and trying to make sense of why so much effort and faithfulness seemed to bear such little fruit. Over the years I would hear it over and over again: “Seminary didn’t train me for this, Tod.”<sup>1</sup>

Back then, I was serving a congregation as their senior pastor and on a commission to prepare my denomination for the future. I had also started doing consulting and coaching in leading change with church and nonprofit leaders. On one particular day, I was stunned when three of my colleagues all resigned from their churches. There were no affairs or scandals or renunciations of faith—just three good servants all throwing in the towel, overwhelmed by the task in front of them.

It can be daunting to realize that the very same experience that makes people trust you at the helm may have reinforced some habits that will keep you from being able to take on the challenges of the moment.

The circumstances were as different as the pastors themselves, but there was one thing they all had in common: their churches were struggling because so many of the approaches and assumptions of the past were no longer working. The pastors hadn't changed their beliefs; the churches hadn't changed their values.

The world around them had changed.

And both the leaders and their churches were struggling to “keep up” and “keep the faith.” In many ways, these pastors

were the canaries in the coal mine, the harbinger of the “Great Resignation” that would come a decade later.<sup>2</sup>

Most pastors had been trained in seminaries on denominational structures that if we simply focused our attention on building good, solid institutional churches with good preaching of the Scriptures, attentive pastoral care, and a few relevant programs for kids and youth, then all would be well. But over the past generation, those assumptions have been called into question. Churches of all kinds have seen diminishing attendance. Millennials are leaving the churches that raised them at the rate of one million a year, and the number of *nones*—those who when asked on demographic forms what religion they belong to, answer “none”—is skyrocketing.<sup>3</sup>

Many of us began to realize that the training we received didn’t match the moment.

But still we put our heads down and just kept doing what we always did, hoping that this time it would be different, until we exhausted ourselves.

And the pace of change was just speeding up.



In 2015 I published *Canoeing the Mountains*, a book that uses the metaphor of Lewis and Clark's expedition as a way of describing the kind of adaptive leadership that is needed when you go "off the map" and face challenges for which you have no expertise. Adaptive leadership teaches us to build trust through forming relational "holding environments," to expect to experience loss when we let go of deeply held behaviors and expectations, and to become people *who can learn as we go*. It teaches us that we have to learn to manage competing values and to deal with sabotage and resistance—by the very people we are called to lead.

## ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES...

1. REQUIRE LEARNING



2. RESULT IN FACING LOSS



3. REVEAL COMPETING VALUES THAT MUST BE NAMED & NAVIGATED



4. REQUIRE EXPERIMENTATION & FAILURE



5. RESULT IN RESISTANCE THAT MUST BE FACED WITH RESILIENCE



For the first five years after its publication, I traveled half a million miles to three different continents and spoke to over two hundred churches and groups of pastors and leaders. Declining denominations, disconnected membership, and depressing worship attendance numbers were taking their toll. Preachers who raised up biblical texts about racial injustice found their congregants accusing them of bringing politics into the pulpit. Pastors who raised concerns about how Christians seemed more committed to victory in the voting booth than in loving their neighbors were called out for pandering to social pressures. Conflicts within congregations and denominations over social issues seemed to suck the joy out of friendship and connection. People began to seek out and sort themselves to be with others who agreed with them on every issue.<sup>4</sup> Soon, it seemed like droves of people were angrily checking out or silently fading away from the communities that they once loved.

And that was before the coronavirus pandemic.

After the pandemic hit and travel ceased, I conducted 170 webinars and was interviewed on dozens of podcasts. Every conversation I had was focused on faith leaders all trying to learn how to lead when the “world in front of you is nothing like the word behind you”—and especially when those changes are coming so rapidly. It’s not just the change that is so disorienting, but the speed of change.<sup>5</sup>



As the Covid-19 pandemic wore on, even leaders who had been skeptical of the premise of a rapidly changing world became advocates for learning new ways of leadership. And as one scandal after another seemed to “take out” another high-profile leader, many began to question the whole idea of leadership itself.<sup>6</sup> In the months since then, many leaders have begun to question their assumptions about leadership being defined by position, platforms, popularity, and personality. We have grown skeptical of leaders who seem more focused on their own control or charisma, their own “brands” and ideas, than on actually serving people, but we are unsure how the values and teachings of faith translate into vibrant, enduring communities and institutions.

Our old leadership practices are no longer working, and we don’t know what to do.

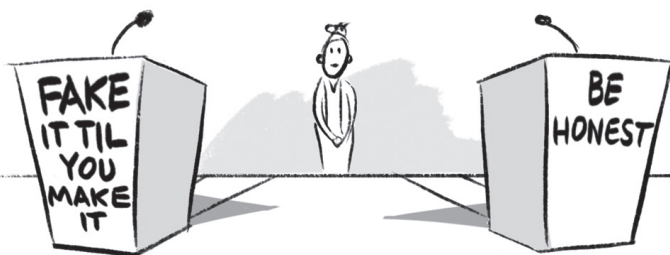
As it turns out, we are in good company.

“We do not know what to do,  
but our eyes are on you.”

*2 Chronicles 20:12*

In the biblical story, Jehoshaphat, the ancient king of Judah, gets word that an immense army made up of three enemy foes is massing against him. He gathers the families of Judah together in assembly and they cry out to God for help. The

story of God’s miraculous display of power in giving Judah victory is often and rightly told to assure the faithful that the biggest battles of life are “not yours but God’s.” But what is most instructive for us is what Jehoshaphat did *before* the battle, when the news was so frightening and the future so daunting. What Jehoshaphat does at that moment is breathtaking for its bold vulnerability.



He stands before his people and admits that *he doesn't know what to do*.

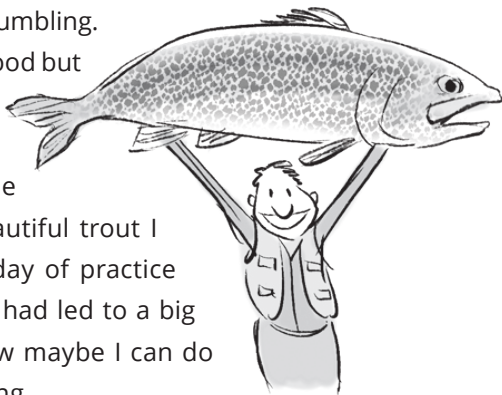
And this is a significant shift for both leaders and their people alike. So, the new mindset for leading through a world of “permanent crisis” is not how to bring your expertise, education, and mastery to bear on the challenges before you, *but training differently in how to learn to lead all over again—in real time—in the midst of the crisis*.

Whether you are standing hip deep in a river or racing too fast down an icy slope, whether you are facing a worldwide

crisis or just the next challenge to come across your desk, *re-learning to lead*—in the middle of that moment when your old ways don't work—is the only way forward.

And it is hard and humbling.

The day after that good but grueling fly-fishing lesson with my guide, I caught one of the biggest and most beautiful trout I ever caught. A hard day of practice unlearning old habits had led to a big gain in my ability. Now maybe I can do the same with my skiing.



And together, maybe we can do that with your leadership.

## CHAPTER 2 OLD MINDSET: DON'T JUST STAND THERE —DO SOMETHING!

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One of the famous leadership principals of Amazon is a “bias to action.” As a company, Amazon recruits, trains, and promotes those who have a tendency to try a lot of new ideas all the time.

At Amazon.com, there is a natural tendency to push forward at all times. The right kind of person for Amazon.com is somebody who is astute and contemplative yet avoids paralysis from analysis—the kind of person who is always moving forward on things without waiting to be asked to do so.<sup>1</sup>

The secret that most leaders don't want to say out loud is that a crisis can be energizing.

They are “take the hill” people who are eager to try the next new thing. For many, there is great enthusiasm for “pushing forward at all times” (at least in theory!). And there is nothing like a crisis to focus the attention and energy of people in a common direction (at least for a time!)

Even more, leaders are praised for being people of action. As legendary two-time-Super-Bowl-winning football coach Bill Parcells used to have on a sign in the locker room: “Blame Nobody. Expect Nothing. Do Something.”<sup>2</sup> Or, as many of us were taught by our parents when they saw us too idle at home when there were chores to do, “Don’t just stand there. Do something.”



So we jump up, grab a broom or a hammer or open an Excel spreadsheet, and start cleaning or fixing or making a plan.

*But what if we really don't know what to do?*

What if the challenges in front of us have so disoriented us that we are just racing breathless from one idea to the next, frantically doing anything? One of my early leadership coaches taught me that when what you are doing *isn't* working, there are two things you *cannot* do:

1. Do what you have already done.
2. Do nothing.

In other words, when we meet those moments of disequilibrium that arise within us because we are in an unfamiliar, anxiety-producing situation, we have to resist the temptations

to either double down or fold our hands. For most of us—because we aren't those who would do nothing—that means we have to deliberately resist our default reaction to jump in with both feet, relying on the best practices of the past, hoping that this time it will have a different result. At those moments we just work harder and unconsciously block out the new information that tells us the circumstances are different and more drastic change is necessary.

We have to deliberately resist our default reaction to jump in with both feet, relying on the best practices of the past, hoping that this time it will have a different result.

In his *Everyday Survival: Why Smart People Do Stupid Things*, Laurence Gonzales writes that the key to surviving in a world filled with unknowns is keeping a constant posture of “curiosity, awareness, and attention.” We need to question our own tenacious clinging to previous training, our reactive mindset, and quick-fix tactics. But, says Gonzales, we are not naturally inclined toward these characteristics. Partly, says Gonzales, our brains work this way. We take experiences from our past and learn lessons—often the wrong lessons—from them. Specifically, we expect that whatever has been in the past will be the same in the future. And whatever has worked in the past will work again in the

future. That expectation leads us to ignore “real information coming to us from our environment.”<sup>3</sup>

So, we just keep doing what we have always done.

In the moment of crisis,  
you will not rise to the occasion;  
you will default to your training.

In the movie *Moneyball*, Brad Pitt plays Billy Beane, the general manager of the Oakland Athletics baseball team. Oakland is a small-market team without the revenue to compete with major-market teams like New York, Los Angeles, and Boston. His best players keep leaving to cash in with those clubs. His owner can't give him any more money, and now he has to replace three star players. He gathers his scouting staff to problem solve. What does this highly trained, well-paid, experienced group of expert baseball minds do? They use the same thinking, the same approach, the same strategy they've always used—*which has not been working*. They doubled down on their old methods and became defensive when challenged. That film clip reminded me of a lesson I learned from a mentor, which one of *his* mentors taught *him*: “In the moment of crisis, you will not rise to the occasion; you will default to your training.”<sup>4</sup>

This was the problem with Billy Beane's scouting team, and it is a significant issue with most leaders. We are well

trained. We are experienced and successful. Indeed, if we weren't, most of us wouldn't be in the very leadership positions that we occupy. We were trained to step up, do something, and make things better.

But that means for most of us, our default behavior is to start fixing a problem right away. But what if we don't even really know what the enduring problem is? *We are trained to start solving problems even before we really see them.* When we do, we default to old “best practices” and hope that we can get by with a few quick fixes or small tweaks.

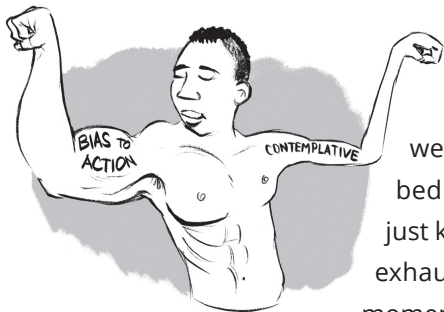
**We are trained to start solving problems  
even before we really see them.**

For church leaders during the pandemic, that meant making some small changes to something that we had done many, many times before—like running the same worship service but recording it and posting it to the web and hoping that would be enough (similar to the first “movies” after motion-picture cameras were invented that were actually just stage plays with a camera in front of them).<sup>5</sup> For business leaders, that meant leading the same kinds of meetings that we would have had in a conference room, but now using online technology. Likewise for teachers, trying to reproduce a classroom interaction with each learner interacting the same way but on the digital



platform over distance. We picked up the phone and called all our congregants, customers, and constituents. We made sure that people felt our sense of connection even as we were all experiencing social distancing. We even organized online Bible studies, team meetings, and socials with Zoom coffee hours, replacing the weekly chats around the water cooler or in the fellowship hall.

Those default actions felt great—*at first*. (It is so energizing to just be *doing* anything at all, isn't it?) But soon came the dawning realization that these traditional approaches weren't really working in any enduring way, even as they had been adjusted for online consumption.



What did we do then?

*We paddled even harder.*

It didn't matter that we were in a canoe in a dry riverbed without water; we still just kept working until we were exhausted. Remember: at the moment of crisis, we don't rise to the occasion, we default to our training. And most of the training of our past—even though it feels good to put it to use—is quickly revealed to be unsuitable for a future that is crashing in on us.

So, what should we do instead?

Don't just default to previous actions.  
Focus on first seeing the deeper issues  
being revealed in the crisis.

Most leaders reading the quote about Amazon's "bias to action" that opened this chapter skip over the phrase that describes the action-focused leader: "astute and contemplative."

The right kind of person . . . is somebody who is astute and contemplative yet avoids paralysis from analysis—the kind of person who is always moving forward on things without waiting to be asked to do so.

Yes, bias-to-action leaders resist getting caught in the "paralysis of analysis," and even more, they take initiative and start working on the new challenges in front of them "without waiting to be asked to do so." But "astute" leaders are the "contemplative" leaders who don't just start defaulting to old, outdated, actions but are *reflective* leaders with a reflective bias to action.

They instead focus on first seeing the deeper issues that are being revealed in the crisis.

And learning how to do that is where we will turn next.



## BALCONY SESSION

1. START BY CONSIDERING THIS QUESTION, "FOR WHAT AM I MOST TRAINED?" IN OTHER WORDS, OF ALL THE SKILLS & ABILITIES THAT YOU BRING TO THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE, WHAT WERE YOU BEST TRAINED TO DO?



2. THINK OF THE LAST TIME YOU FACED A CRISIS OR A CHALLENGE THAT REQUIRED A RESPONSE.

IN WHAT WAYS DID YOUR TRAINING KICK IN AT THAT MOMENT? WHAT DID YOU DO? TO WHAT LEVEL WAS YOUR RESPONSE A KIND OF "AUTO-PILOT"? HOW MIGHT IT HAVE KEPT YOU FROM BEING ABLE TO SEE THE DEEPER ISSUES OF THE PROBLEM?



3. NOW CONSIDER THAT PREVIOUS CHALLENGE AGAIN: WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM THAT MOMENT? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOUR TRAINING HELP & IN WHAT WAYS DID IT HINDER YOU?



4. LOOK BACK ONE MORE TIME ON THAT SAME CRISIS OR CHALLENGE & PAUSE TO REFLECT: IF YOU COULD APPLY WHAT YOU LEARNED FROM THAT MOMENT TO THE NEXT TIME YOU FACE A SIMILAR CRISIS OR CHALLENGE, WHAT WOULD YOU DO DIFFERENTLY?



5. IN THE FUTURE, HOW MIGHT YOU BUILD IN SOME HABITS OF REFLECTION TO COMPLEMENT YOUR "BIAS TO ACTION"?

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