

“No Trust in Miracles”

Leading Through a Water Crisis in Cape Town

Practitioner Guide

KIMBERLYN LEARY, JORRIT DE JONG, AND FERNANDO MONGE

Overview

A case study is a story about how a person or group of people faced and dealt with challenges or opportunities. It is based on desk research and interviews with key actors but does not provide analysis or conclusions. Written from the perspective of the protagonist(s), it is designed to raise questions and generate discussion about the issues they faced. Cases are meant to help participants develop analytic reasoning, listening, and judgment skills to strengthen their decision-making ability in other contexts.

A case-based conversation is a way to anchor a conceptual discussion to concrete examples. It can bring a case to life and allow participants to place themselves in the shoes of the case protagonist(s), while also allowing a variety of perspectives to surface. This guide is designed to help you lead a conversation about the case, “No Trust in Miracles. Leading Through a Water Crisis in Cape Town.”

Role of a Facilitator

The facilitator leads a conversation with a clear beginning and end, ensures that everyone is heard, and keeps the group focused. The conversation can be broken into three distinct segments: exploring the case, applying the central questions of the case to your organization’s challenges, and formulating takeaway lessons. Some facilitation tips and tricks to keep in mind are below.

BEFORE the discussion

Make sure everyone takes the time to read the case. Participants have the option to fill out the attached worksheet to prepare themselves for the case discussion. If you choose to use the worksheet, make sure you bring enough printouts for all. When setting up the room, think about situating participants where they can see you and each other. Designate a notetaker as well as a place where you can take notes on a flipchart or white board. Plan for at least sixty to seventy-five minutes to discuss the case and takeaways and have a clock in the room and/or an assigned timekeeper. Mention that you may interrupt participants in the interest of progressing the conversation.

DURING the discussion

Encourage participants to debate and share opinions. State very clearly that there is no right or wrong “answer” to the case—cases are written so that reasonable people can disagree and debate different ideas and approaches. Be careful not to allow yourself or others to dominate the discussion. If the conversation is getting heated or bogged down on a particular issue, consider allowing participants to talk in pairs for a few minutes before returning to a full group discussion. Do not worry about reaching consensus, just make the most of this opportunity to practice thinking and learning together!

Case Synopsis

After several years of scarce rain, Cape Town started to prepare for a potentially unprecedented drought at the beginning of the 2017 rainy season. When the season did not deliver the necessary rains, the extreme drought became a one in 300-year event that the city’s water system was not prepared to handle. The government attempted to address this critical dilemma on two fronts: increasing sources of water and reducing water consumption. When it became clear that the additional water would not arrive in time to avoid shortages, however, Executive Mayor Patricia De Lille had to decide whether or not to take more drastic measures and pressure citizens to further cut their water consumption.

Within City Hall, divergent views on when and how to respond to the emerging crisis became a source of contention and resulted in confusing messages that eroded trust within the community. The water crisis exposed other weaknesses of the water system in Cape Town as well, such as deep inequities in water access and deficient coordination among various government levels with different responsibilities for the water system. De Lille’s political position and leadership style also influenced the unfolding crisis.

The case describes the events that led to one of Cape Town’s gravest crises. It looks at some of the deep-rooted features of the city’s governance, economic, and social patterns that shaped the crisis and the response. It further examines the leadership skills required to respond to a problem that demands a collective effort with great trust at multiple levels. Finally, by looking at De Lille’s dilemma of whether or not to announce a specific date for Day Zero (when water would run out in the city), the case explores the difficult decisions and trade-offs that leaders must make when facing crises.

Conversation Plan

Part 1: Exploring the Case (30 minutes)

The goal of this part of the conversation is to review the case from the point of view of the people involved. Suggested questions:

The problem

- *Why was Cape Town in such a critical situation?*

The context

- *How was the crisis shaped by Cape Town’s political history?*
- *What were the equity dimensions of the water crisis?*
- *Who were the relevant and distinct constituencies involved in the water crisis?*

- *What perspective or point of view did each constituency have about the water crisis?*

Leadership and authority

- *Who was Patricia De Lille?*
- *As mayor, what tools and powers could she have brought to bear? What constraints precluded her from doing otherwise?*
- *How did different constituencies respond to her leadership? Who gave her the most and least support and why?*
- *Choose one or two constituencies. What could De Lille have done to improve her credibility with each?*

Part 2: Application (20 minutes)

Invite participants to break into pairs or work as a group to apply the concepts discussed to their own managerial challenges. Suggested questions:

- *Consider a recent crisis faced by your organization or imagine one that it could face in the future. What were or are the challenges of acting in time?*
- *What part of the problem can be addressed by experts, and what part of the work can only be done by the people?*
- *In what ways can you practice leadership through mobilizing others? In what ways can you use authority, resources, and power? Which way is most effective?*
- *What are the equity dimensions of your managerial challenge?*

Part 3: Formulating Lessons (15–20 minutes)

This part of the conversation focuses on the lessons of the case that participants may continue to reflect on and apply to challenges in their work. High-level takeaways to review after a productive discussion might include:

- Identifying the type of problem that you are facing is key to understanding the type of leadership work that will be required to tackle it.

Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky use the framework of adaptive leadership to distinguish between technical and adaptive problems: “Technical problems, while often challenging, can be solved applying existing know-how and the organization’s current problem-solving processes. Adaptive problems resist these kinds of solutions because they require individuals throughout the organization to alter their ways; as the people themselves are the problem, the solution lies with them.”¹

¹ Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *A Survival Guide for Leaders*, Harvard Business Review, June 2002.

- Crisis leadership and management is a deeply collaborative endeavor. Failure to build what Amy Edmondson calls “psychological safety”² in your organization can create serious difficulties to lead through the crisis once it hits.

Psychological safety enables experimentation, failure, and learning from failure to build cohesive and high-performing teams:

- The work is framed as learning, not just an execution problem.
 - It requires acknowledging limits and personal fallibility.
 - It invites input and authorizes messengers.
 - It encourages listening intently to words and “the song below the words.”
 - Meaningful dissent is encouraged.
- Entrenched inequities can fuel distrust among the community, resulting in greater difficulties in building the necessary support and commitment needed to mobilize people.
 - Crafting adequate communication and messaging during crises is fundamental to renegotiate the social contract, especially when you need to ask the community and different constituencies to bear the costs of the crisis.

² Amy C. Edmondson and Jean-Francois Harvey (2017) *Extreme Teaming: Lessons in Complex, Cross-Sector Leadership*, Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017 and Amy C. Edmondson (1999). “Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams,” *Administrative Science Quarterly*.

Worksheet

1. *Why was Cape Town in such a critical situation?*
2. *What were the equity dimensions of the water crisis?*
3. *As mayor, what tools and powers could Patricia De Lille have brought to bear?*
4. *How did different constituencies respond to her leadership? Who gave her the most and least support and why?*