

LEADERSHIP

# The Five Things Great Leaders Do When Everything Is Falling Apart

*Insights from conversations with leaders who operate inside some of the most complex systems in the world reveal a surprisingly consistent playbook — and it has nothing to do with the industry they're in.*

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Synthesized from the *Success in Chaos* podcast · Info Health · 2025–2026

There is a particular kind of leader who seems to get better when things get worse. While their peers are overwhelmed, these leaders get clearer. When their organizations are losing altitude, they somehow keep people calm and moving forward. And when the dust settles, they tend to have built something stronger than what existed before the crisis hit.

What separates them from everyone else?

Over the past year, the *Success in Chaos* podcast interviewed leaders who routinely operate inside environments of radical uncertainty — executives running complex health systems, innovators building companies from scratch in industries they didn't fully understand, coaches who spend decades helping senior leaders survive high-stakes moments, and clinical practitioners who have navigated extraordinary disruption at the front lines. The conversations span geography, sector, and background. But they converge, again and again, on the same set of behaviors.

These are not comfort-zone observations. The guests on this show have led organizations through pandemics, workforce crises, technological revolutions, and policy earthquakes. Several of them have led during literal national emergencies. What they've learned — about clarity, about connection, about the difference between what's loud and what's actually important — applies to any leader, in any field, who has ever looked at the road ahead and thought: I'm not sure how we get through this.

Here are the five lessons.

## LESSON 1 Clarity Is Not About Knowing Everything — It's About Knowing What Matters Right Now

The instinct when things go wrong is to solve everything simultaneously. More meetings. More dashboards. More strategic priorities on more laminated signs in more hallways. The leaders who actually perform well under pressure do the opposite: they narrow.

John Hill, a former multi-hospital CEO who now coaches C-suite executives, describes watching leaders dissolve their own capacity by expanding their focus lists beyond all reason. "I work with organizations every day," he said, "and I'll get a list of 20, 30 priorities. How can you accomplish all 30 things?" His answer — the same answer he developed through 30 years of operational leadership — is that you can't. The organizations that perform best in chaos are the ones who identify the critical two or three things and align every resource behind them.

But Hill goes one step further than simple prioritization. He argues that the "why" behind the priorities matters as much as the priorities themselves. "Do we actually know the why behind the initiatives we're trying to solve?" he asked. "And more importantly, do we all buy into the why? Because once we do, then we can focus with high clarity of understanding and purpose." Focus without shared understanding is just obedience. Focus with shared understanding is momentum.

Kernesha Weatherly, Vice President of Imaging at Ochsner Health and named to Modern Healthcare's 40 Under 40, offers a framework her team now uses in real time: the plastic ball versus the glass ball. When a situation erupts and everything feels equally urgent, she asks her people: is this a plastic ball or a glass ball? Plastic balls make a lot of noise when they drop — but you can pick them back up. Glass balls are a different story. "When you're thinking about rapid change," she said, "the question is: is it loud or is it important?" Those are not always the same thing.

***"Clarity isn't about knowing everything. It's about making sure the team knows what matters in that moment."***

— Kernesha Weatherly, VP of Imaging, Ochsner Health

David Larson, Director of the AI Development Lab at Stanford and a professor of radiology who has led hundreds of improvement projects, puts a research frame around the same idea. When

his department faced a list of 44 competing goals, he didn't try to tackle them all. He paused, organized, and allowed teams to self-select the problems they cared most about solving. The result: 16 genuinely impactful projects in the first year — and what he describes as a transformative experience for everyone involved. "Rather than trying to impose that from the top down," he explained, "we got the people who are closest to the work to solve the problems."

The pattern is consistent: in chaos, the most effective leaders do not try to see everything. They choose what to see — and they help their teams see it too.

## **LESSON 2 Your People's Bullsh\*t Meters Are Calibrated Better Than You Think**

Foster Mobley has been coaching senior leaders since 1985. He has worked with C-suite executives across healthcare, elite athletic programs, and major professional services firms. After four decades of watching how leaders behave when things get hard, he has a core observation that lands differently than most leadership advice:

***"Bullsh\*t meters are up really high these days. So cut it out. If you don't know what something is, say, 'I don't know how to do this, and let's work together and figure it out.' Don't spend a couple of months trying to posture and cover."***

— Foster Mobley, Executive Coach and Founder, FMG Leading

This is not a colorful observation. It is a strategic diagnosis. Leaders who perform well in uncertain environments do not try to appear as if they have answers they don't have. They create safety for not-knowing. They model intellectual honesty so completely that others feel permission to be honest too — and honest environments are faster, more adaptive, and more resilient than environments built on performance.

Mobley pushes this further. Authenticity, in his framework, is not a soft quality. It is a functional requirement for sustainable performance. "All we have as leaders is our example," he said. "Watch my feet, not my lips." The values of an organization are not what appear on the wall — they are what they see you actually do. Especially when things are hard. Especially when it would be easier to perform confidence you don't feel.

Crista Durand, the president and CEO of Hospital for Special Care, describes a moment during COVID when she could have managed her way through the crisis from a safe distance. Instead, she did something that felt professionally risky: she sat down directly with frontline staff — the people who knew exactly what was and wasn't working — and made herself genuinely accountable to their feedback. "I was afraid to be vulnerable," she admitted. "But by doing that, I created a deeper connection to the organization."

The result was the President's Advisory Council — a program that had a waiting list within a year, produced more than 100 operational improvements that leadership would never have generated alone, and drove employee engagement above national averages for four consecutive years. Her formula: deliberately recruit some "rebel rousers" — people who will challenge, not just affirm — and give them a real forum. The critics who feel heard become your strongest advocates. The ones who don't become a different kind of problem.

John Hill draws the connection between authenticity and frontline trust with unusual directness: "You can't fake caring as a healthcare leader. The people you lead are called to this work. They love it. And if a leader shows up and tries to show that they care and it's not authentic, they will sniff that out in a heartbeat."

The principle scales. In any field, in any organization: the moment your people suspect a gap between what you say and what you believe, you've lost something that is very difficult to recover.

### **LESSON 3 Find the Connection Before You Reach for the Correction**

Kernesha Weatherly has traveled to more than 60 countries. She drives a manual transmission. She once ended up across an international border she wasn't supposed to be across, navigated out quietly, and reflects on it now as one of the most instructive experiences of her leadership life. The lesson she drew from years of traveling in unfamiliar places shaped her entire approach to walking into a room where something has gone wrong.

"Travel really teaches you that everyone is the same — we're just seen from a different lens," she explained. "It forces you to adapt without ego. You learn how to observe, you learn how to listen."

You respect the traditions before trying to fix things." And then, more precisely: "Find the connection before the correction."

***"What looks like resistance is often typically a misunderstanding."***

— Kernesha Weatherly, VP of Imaging, Ochsner Health

This is a reframe that changes everything about how you enter a difficult situation. Most leaders are trained to see problems and fix them. Weatherly's insight is that a significant portion of what looks like a problem is actually a relationship waiting to be built. She doesn't walk into a tense room with a solution. She walks in with attention.

Foster Mobley names the same principle differently. He describes the power paradigm in leadership shifting from "power over" to "power with" — from a model where the leader directs from above to one where the leader partners across. "The power is shifting," he said. "It's a much more partnering paradigm in leadership today." His framework for honoring people — genuinely regarding them as collaborators rather than subordinates — is built on the same foundation: understand first, then lead.

Kara Trott, who built Quantum Health from a bootstrapped startup into a billion-dollar company by relentlessly studying how people actually experience confusion and complexity, describes the same instinct as the basis of her company's entire model. Before she knew what she was going to build, she formulated a research study that tracked 3,200 people for two years — not to validate a solution she'd already invented, but to understand the experience. "My way of understanding," she said, "had always been to step into the consumer's shoes and walk with them and see where things go wrong."

The leaders who recover fastest from crisis are not the ones who respond fastest. They are the ones who understand most accurately before they move.

#### **LESSON 4 Communication Is Not a Message — It's a Circulation System**

Crista Durand does not send an email and call it communication. She gives town halls. She does biweekly newsletters. She runs quarterly provider coffee talks. She shows up in the hallways unannounced with candy and trivia. She posts the organization's six strategic priorities in every

department, checks whether staff can name them, and uses the results as data about her own effectiveness as a leader. She and her chief medical officer do Friday rounds. And she's not done yet.

"If you want something to be breathable and livable in the whole ecosystem of your organization," she explained, "you have to bring the energy to it." Strategy is not a document. It is a living thing, and it stays alive only as long as the leader keeps animating it.

***"The culture will only move as fast as it trusts. You have to meet people where they are."***

— Crista Durand, President and CEO, Hospital for Special Care

Her framing — "culture moves only as fast as it trusts" — is a diagnostic tool. If change is stalling, the question is not whether the strategy is right. The question is whether the trust infrastructure exists to carry it. And trust is not declared; it is earned through the accumulation of consistent, authentic, two-way communication over time.

David Larson describes the same dynamic from a different angle. When he built Stanford's radiology improvement program, the structural move that made it work was not the goal-setting process or the project framework. It was the "eyes on, hands off" posture of leadership — visible enough to support, restrained enough to let teams own their work. "Rather than trying to impose that from the top down," he said, "we gave them ownership over these areas."

Ownership requires communication that goes both ways. Not just broadcasting priorities downward, but creating genuine channels for the organization's intelligence to flow upward. Durand discovered this when she asked frontline staff — during COVID, when she easily could have avoided the vulnerability — what they actually needed. The answer changed her strategy. And it changed the organization.

Most leaders over-invest in articulation and under-invest in reception. The leaders in this corpus do both — and they treat the return signal as data, not as feedback to be managed.

There is a particular skill that shows up again and again across this set of conversations — one that is rarely discussed in leadership development programs, never listed as a core competency on a job description, and almost impossible to fake. It is the ability to decelerate internally while the environment accelerates around you.

Kernesha Weatherly describes it plainly: "I am my calmest in the midst of chaos. The more chaotic the situation is, I drop all the way down. Somebody has got to be." She learned this the hard way — by trying, early in her career, to stop chaotic situations by matching their energy and making them worse. Now she does what she calls the "Fred Flintstone": feet scrubbing on the ground. A full stop before any response.

***"People reflect off of how you respond to the situation. If you're in their midst of chaos, they are looking at you."***

— Kernesha Weatherly, VP of Imaging, Ochsner Health

John Hill coaches this exact capacity in his work with executives — and he has developed a distinctive method for building it. He takes leaders out of their offices and puts them into genuinely unfamiliar, genuinely uncomfortable situations: hiking trails with bear warning signs, diving with sharks in Belize. The point is not the drama. The point is experiential learning about how to find your floor — what he calls "dropping into flow" — and to know what that state feels like in your body, so you can access it when the pressure is real.

"High-performing leaders actually understand the markers or the milestones before they drop into that state of highest performance," he explained. "They understand what it takes to drop in." And critically: "We can't always live in the zone. We need to drop out. We need to recover. We need to rest." Sustainable performance under pressure requires managing the recovery, not just the peak.

Foster Mobley tells the story of watching sea otters from a boat in Glacier Bay. When the seas get high, he observed, sea otters don't go under. They hold hands. "They link arms and form a raft. And they can survive any storm." His prescription for leaders follows the same logic: when things get hard, the instinct to go alone is the wrong instinct. "These times call for a deeper, richer connection between people."

This is not a soft prescription. Connection is a performance variable. Teams whose leaders stay grounded — who don't amplify panic, who model steady attention in the middle of disruption — outperform teams whose leaders escalate. The data on this is clear in organizational research. The leaders in this corpus have built it into a daily practice.

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## A Final Thought

None of these lessons are complicated. What they require is not intelligence or resources — it is the willingness to slow down long enough to practice them when everything around you is speeding up.

Clarity over comprehensiveness. Honesty over performance. Connection before correction. Communication as a living system, not a broadcast. And the capacity to stay grounded when the environment refuses to cooperate.

These leaders operate in some of the most demanding organizational environments that exist. They face staffing shortages, policy upheaval, technological disruption, and financial pressure simultaneously. And yet what makes them effective is not their ability to outmaneuver complexity. It is their ability to remain, in the middle of it, recognizably themselves — clear-eyed, genuinely connected to the people around them, and willing to say out loud when they don't know.

The chaos is not going away. The question is what kind of leader you choose to be inside it.

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### About This Piece

This article draws on qualitative analysis of interviews conducted across twelve episodes of *Success in Chaos*, a healthcare leadership podcast produced by Inflo Health. All quotes are verbatim and fully attributed. Guests include: John Hill (Healthcare Consensus Partners), Foster Mobley (FMG Leading), Kernesha Weatherly (Ochsner Health), Crista Durand (Hospital for Special Care), Kara Trott (Quantum Health, founder), David Larson (Stanford University / ACR), and additional leaders across health system operations, radiology, federal health policy, and healthcare innovation.

*Healthcare context has been intentionally abstracted to surface universal leadership principles applicable across industries.*