

Using Critical Incidents to Build Leadership Competence

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Leaders are tasked with solving problems that often represent persistent and unyielding challenges. A critical incident is an event where you as a leader attempted to address a challenge and things did not turn out as planned. Analyzing these moments can yield significant insights and learning about you personally, about how you understand or carry out your role, and/or about how the system (the visible and invisible rules, relationships and dynamics of an organization) influences your leadership choices and opportunities.

The primary goal of critical incident analysis is to fully understand what happened and explore multiple ideas about why it happened the way it did. Critical incident analysis helps leaders to see things in a new way and to try something new.

Critical Incident Analysis: A three-step process

The learning from a critical incident is uncovered when you as a leader take these three steps to better understand what did not go well:

1. **Describe** the facts of the incident: what was intended, what actually happened and who were the people involved.
2. **Diagnose** what led to the incident: what are multiple hypotheses about “why” it did not turn out well.
3. **Decide** what to do: what are new insights and possible next steps to trying something new.

Getting Started

Think of an incident where things did not go well for you in your leadership role and where the issue or challenge is still present for you. Use an incident that is current and where – even now, with the benefit of hindsight – you’re not exactly sure what you could have done to contribute to a better outcome. Jot some notes to yourself about who was involved, what was at issue, what you intended, and what happened. The incident should be one in which you had a conversation with the other person or people and where you will be talking or working with them again in the future.



Step One: Describe What Happened

Identify a colleague who will listen and ask effective questions.

During this initial step, you describe to your colleague what happened. The description includes what you did, what you hoped would happen and what did happen. Address these questions in your description:

- What are the facts of what happened?
 - Example Fact: “my colleague and I disagreed and then the colleague talked to my boss”

Contents
The Three Steps of Critical Incident Analysis
1. Describe what happened
2. Diagnose by generating multiple hypotheses
3. Decide on next steps



- Tip: Focus on facts not interpretations. An example of an interpretation; “my colleague undermined me”

After the initial description of the critical incident, your colleague asks fact-based clarifying questions. These questions illuminate what happened and create a deeper understanding of power dynamics, formal and informal roles, intentions of others, etc.



Step Two: Diagnose – Generating multiple hypotheses

During this step your colleague helps you to unpack the critical incident by generating and sharing more than one hypothesis as to what is really going on. In sharing hypotheses the colleague refrains from problem solving and you take the opportunity to listen with an open mind to gain new insights.

The following are areas to explore in generating hypotheses¹:

- Person-Role-System Analysis to illuminate the leader’s contribution to the incident
- Presence of adaptive and technical challenges and issues of loss
- Influence of race, class, culture
- Factors of trust, power, authority and accountability
- Competing interests
- Types of conflicts (values, relationships, data, structural, language)



Step Three: Deciding – Next Steps based on new insights

Based on what you have heard, you then reflect on the hypotheses and share your insights, especially those about your contribution to the incident. Using these new insights about the critical incident and about yourself and others, you then decide what you will do differently going forward and what steps you will take to address the situation in a new way.

Trying it yourself

Journal:

What is a situation that you are facing where you don’t know how to move forward...a situation where you have attempted to address without success or with limited success?

What was the issue?

Who was involved?

What happened?

What did you intend?

What was your contribution to the incident?

Who will you invite to be your colleague analyzing your critical incident?

How will you share the critical incident analysis approach with them?

¹ These tools and frames as well as others can be found on RBLApps.com