CRISIS MANAGEMENT FOR ASSOCIATION LEADERS

FROM THE GENEVA ASSOCIATION DAYS



GENEVA

INTRODUCTION

International and European associations operate in an increasingly complex and interconnected environment. Conferences, global partnerships, staff mobility, and digital communication create enormous opportunities, but they also increase exposure to risk. During the Geneva Association Days 2026, one of the key masterclasses focused on crisis management, delivered by expert Niko Orell. Combining practical insights with a real-life simulation workshop, the session explored how leaders can respond effectively when facing a crisis. This white paper summarises the key lessons from that session and highlights practical principles associations can apply in their daily operations.

NIKO ORELL

WHAT IS A CRISIS?

HOW TO MAKE THE BEST DECISION?

HOW TO DEAL WITH THE HUMAN FACTOR?

HOW TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY?

HOW TO BE A GOOD LEADER IN TIMES OF CRISIS?

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR ASSOCIATIONS

GENEVA THE PERFECT DESTINATION FOR INTERNATIONAL AND EUROPEAN CONFERENCES







ASSOCIATION DAYS
GENEVA

The Geneva Association Days is a two half-day event aiming at providing a dynamic and inclusive platform for associations and NGOs. CEO and Directors of international and European associations and NGOs came together to access cutting-edge knowledge and exchange with experts. The masterclasses' topics are carefully selected to address concerns of associations and foster fruitful collaborations.

The second edition of the Geneva Association Days was held on 28-29 January 2026 and fully organised and financed by the Geneva Convention Bureau.

The Geneva Convention Bureau is a passionate team expert in promoting Geneva as a congress destination. We provide in-depth knowledge of the meeting industry with a focus on customised solutions.

MORE INFORMATION

NIKO ORELL



HEAD OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT, GENEVA CENTRE FOR SECURITY POLICY (GCSP)

Niko Orell is a leading expert in crisis management, defence policy, and security with over 25 years of experience across Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Indo-Pacific.

He specialises in crisis response, resilience, risk management, and decision-making under pressure. He has advised EU and NATO bodies, contributed to EU crisis management concepts and mission planning, and supported EU operations in Europe and Africa. A retired Finnish Air Force Lieutenant Colonel, fighter pilot and combat veteran, he brings extensive operational leadership experience, including command of Finland's Regional Air Operations Centre and Air Operations Chief in Regional Command North in Afghanistan.

Mr. Orell has also worked with the UN in the Sahel region, is a published author and keynote speaker, and collaborates closely with governments, international organisations, and industry.



WHAT IS A CRISIS?

A crisis is often perceived as a sudden dramatic event. However, in organisational terms, the definition is more precise. A crisis is described as: "An abnormal or extraordinary event or situation that threatens an organisation or community and requires a strategic, adaptive and timely response to preserve its viability and integrity." – ISO-22361

At its core, crisis management is about evaluating a situation and finding solutions to a problem under pressure.

Importantly, crises do not always begin with dramatic events. In many cases, they emerge from situations that initially appear manageable. Even small issues can cascade into major crises if they are not understood and addressed early. What may seem like a routine operational difficulty can escalate when uncertainty, time pressure and risk combine.

A useful example shared during the session illustrates this dynamic. In Japan, a tsunami is not necessarily considered a crisis in itself, as organisations may have established business continuity plans to manage such events. However, if an unexpected complication occurs, such as the impact on a nuclear power facility, the situation can rapidly evolve into a crisis. The lesson for organisations is clear: crises often arise not only from the initial event but from the unexpected consequences that follow.



For international associations, which frequently operate across multiple countries and organise events around the world, this cascading effect can occur particularly quickly. Teams, participants, partners and stakeholders may be spread across different locations, increasing both the complexity and the speed at which situations can escalate.

Every crisis contains four defining elements and questions to answer to assess the situation and respond in the best possible way:

→ **Uncertainty**
What is actually happening?

→ **Time pressure**
How much time is available to respond?

→ **Risk**
What consequences must be prevented?

→ **Stress**
How does pressure affects judgement and behaviour?



HOW TO MAKE THE BEST DECISION?

Making decisions during a crisis is particularly challenging. Leaders must often act under pressure, with incomplete information, while managing the stress of both the situation and the team around them.

Several key principles can help organisations make better decisions when facing uncertainty.

1

THE IMPACT OF STRESS AND THE ROLE OF DECISION FRAMEWORKS

Stress plays a major role during crises. It affects how human beings think and behave. When individuals are under intense pressure, their ability to analyse situations objectively can diminish, making it harder to evaluate options and make sound decisions.

For this reason, preparation is essential. One effective approach is the use of ready-made decision frameworks. These structured approaches act as a form of “muscle memory”, enabling leaders to rely on established processes rather than improvising under pressure.

For example, fighter pilots rely on predefined procedures to manage high-pressure situations. When stress levels increase, they follow structured steps that guide their actions and ensure that critical factors are not overlooked.

In crisis situations, such structured thinking becomes essential. It helps leaders maintain clarity and avoid reactive decision-making.

For association, establishing a clear business continuity planning plays an important role in crisis preparedness. They should ensure that procedures are regularly tested and rehearsed through drills so that teams are familiar with how to respond when an unexpected situation occurs.

2

TIMING AND THE IMPORTANCE OF TAKING THE TIME TO DEFINE THE PROBLEM

Another challenge in crisis management is timing. When an unexpected event occurs, leaders often feel an immediate need to act. While this instinct is understandable, it can lead associations to attempt to solve problems before fully understanding them.

Clearly defining the problem is often the most critical step in crisis management. Without a clear understanding of the situation, associations risk implementing solutions that fail to address the real issue.

At the same time, leaders must avoid waiting too long before acting. Delayed decisions can also increase the impact of a crisis. The challenge therefore lies in striking the right balance between evaluation and action.

A useful metaphor is the distinction between the “dance floor” and the “balcony”.

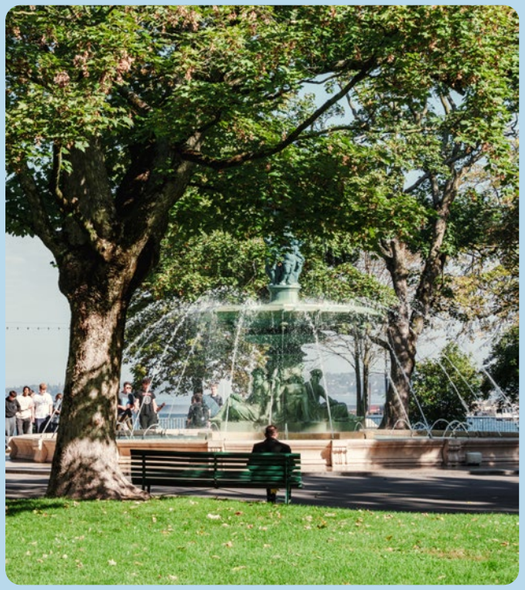
→ The dance floor represents the space where action happens and where individuals respond directly to events.

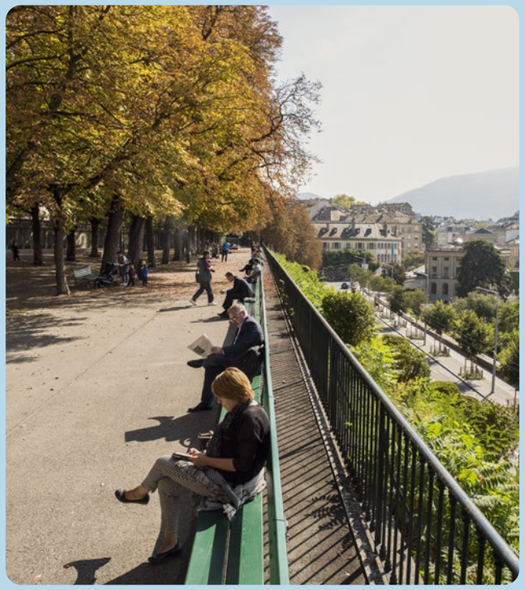
→ The balcony represents a higher vantage point from which the overall situation becomes visible.

During crises, many leaders remain on the “dance floor”, reacting to immediate developments. However, effective crisis management requires periodically stepping onto the “balcony” to observe the situation from a broader perspective.

This “balcony view” allows leaders to identify patterns, evaluate the situation more accurately and understand the bigger picture. It also helps them establish priorities, which is essential when organisations are confronted with multiple competing demands.







3
DECISION-MAKING WITH INCOMPLETE INFORMATION

Another defining characteristic of crises is that information is rarely complete. Leaders must often make decisions before all the facts are known.

Waiting for perfect information is rarely an option. In many cases, delaying action can allow the situation to deteriorate further. Instead, decisions must be made based on the information available at that moment.

This can be uncomfortable for leaders, as it requires accepting a certain level of uncertainty. However, crisis management requires precisely this ability: making informed decisions despite incomplete knowledge.

Establishing clear moments for decision-making is therefore important. This ensures that actions can be implemented while they are still relevant and effective.

4
THE T-DODAR DECISION-MAKING TOOL

To support structured decision-making under pressure, the T-DODAR framework can be used. This method helps teams organise their thinking and make decisions within a limited timeframe.

The process includes the following steps:

→ **Time**
Assess how much time is available before a decision must be made.

→ **Diagnose**
Clarify what is happening and analyse the situation by understanding the root cause and the current state of the crisis.

→ **Options**
Identify potential paths forward and available resources

→ **Decide**
Select the most appropriate option given the current data available

→ **Act and Assign**
Implement the decision and assign specific responsibilities

→ **Review**
Continuously monitor the outcome and reassess the situation.

An important aspect of the model is that it is iterative. After completing the process, teams reassess the situation and repeat the cycle if necessary. This allows associations to continuously adapt their response as new information emerges.

HOW TO DEAL WITH THE HUMAN FACTOR?



Crisis discussions often focus on operational or reputational risks. However, the human dimension of a crisis is equally critical. How individuals react, interact and influence one another can significantly affect the outcome of a crisis response.

DURING CRISES:

→ Stress can spread rapidly within teams

→ Leadership behaviour strongly influences organisational stability

→ Emotional reactions can affect decision-making and communication.

If leaders display panic or uncertainty, these reactions can quickly spread throughout the organisation. In short: “Stress is contagious.” Effective leaders therefore play a key role in absorbing risk and stabilising the team environment. By maintaining calm and structure, they help create conditions in which teams can continue to function effectively.

One practical recommendation is to regularly check in with team members during crisis meetings. A simple exercise consists of asking participants how they feel on a scale from 1 to 10. This practice helps leaders ensure that team members are mentally present and allows them to gauge the emotional state of the group. In high-pressure environments, this simple step can significantly improve communication and collaboration.

Human risk management also involves recognising the diversity of perspectives within international teams. Associations often operate across multiple cultures, and individuals may approach crisis situations differently depending on their cultural background.

These differences can influence communication styles, expectations and decision-making approaches. Being aware of these variations helps leaders manage international teams more effectively and avoid misunderstandings during critical moments.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR LEADERS DURING A CRISIS:

→ Manage your own reactions first. Your behaviour sets the tone for the team.

→ Create calm through structure. Clarify what is known, what is uncertain and what happens next.

→ Check the team, not only the task.

→ Listen for different perspectives, especially when stress, hierarchy or culture may make people less willing to speak up.

→ Keep communication clear and short.

→ Reassess regularly.

→ Delegate deliberately.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY?





Communication is one of the most critical components of crisis management.

In the absence of clear and timely communication from an association, external actors may shape the narrative. Social media and the press can quickly influence how a situation is perceived by stakeholders and the wider public.

If an organisation waits too long to communicate, they risk losing control of the narrative surrounding the crisis. For associations, whose work often depends on trust and credibility, this can significantly increase reputational risk.

Effective crisis communication should therefore be clear, concise and timely. The objective is not only to provide information but also to demonstrate leadership and reassure stakeholders that the situation is being actively managed.

Good communication helps organisations:

→ Maintain trust among members and partners

→ Prevent the spread of misinformation

→ Provide clarity during uncertain situations

→ Protect organisational credibility.

For associations organising international events, communication is particularly important, as participants, partners and stakeholders may be located across different countries and time zones.



HOW TO BE A GOOD LEADER IN TIMES OF CRISIS?

Leadership plays a decisive role in crisis management. Several key leadership behaviours are particularly important when navigating difficult situations.

1

REASSESS CONTINUOUSLY

Crisis situations evolve rapidly. Leaders must therefore regularly reassess the situation and adjust their strategy as new information emerges.

2

DELEGATE WHEN NECESSARY

Crisis leadership cannot rely on a single individual. Delegating certain decisions enables associations to respond more efficiently while ensuring that leaders can maintain an overview of the situation. By combining structured processes, clear communication and strong leadership behaviours, associations can strengthen their capacity to respond effectively when crises arise.

3

MAINTAIN A STEADY ENERGY LEVEL

In crisis situations, emotional reactions can spread quickly. Leaders must therefore maintain a calm and consistent approach. Demonstrating stability helps prevent panic and reassures teams that the situation is under control.

4

ESTABLISH STRUCTURE

Crisis management requires clear processes. A simple and effective structure is to organise response activities around two continuous phases:

→ **Assessment**
Understanding the situation and analysing available information

→ **Action**
Implementing decisions and responding to developments.

This structured approach ensures that teams remain focused and organised.

5

CLARIFY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Clear roles and responsibilities are essential during a crisis. When individuals understand their tasks and authority, decisions can be implemented more quickly and confusion is reduced.

Typical crisis management roles may include responsibilities for leadership, information management, risk analysis and communication.



KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR ASSOCIATIONS

The Geneva Association Days session highlighted several practical principles for associations navigating crisis situations:

- → Small issues can escalate quickly if not properly evaluated.
- → Defining the problem is often more important than immediately solving it.
- → Human factors, including stress, difference in cultures and team dynamics, play a central role in crisis management.
- → Stress significantly affects decision-making.
- → Structured decision frameworks help maintain clarity under pressure.
- → Leaders must sometimes decide with incomplete information.
- → Communication should happen early to protect organisational credibility.
- → Clear roles and structured processes strengthen crisis response.

Associations operate at the intersection of international collaboration, global events, and complex stakeholder networks. As such, they must be prepared to navigate uncertainty.

The insights shared during the Geneva Association Days demonstrate that effective crisis management is not only about responding to emergencies. It is about developing leadership discipline, structured processes, and resilient teams.

GENEVA THE PERFECT DESTINATION FOR INTERNATIONAL AND EUROPEAN CONFERENCES

Geneva is a premier conference destination, home to major international organisations like the UN, WHO, and CERN, alongside internationally renowned academic institutions, such as the University of Geneva, the Geneva University Hospitals, Campus Biotech and CERN. It is a unique place at the intersection of global dialogue and unique local expertise. The perfect mix to foster dialogue between experts, and to provide a valuable platform for connection, meetings and impactful discussions.

Its central location, international airport with over 150 direct flights, and high service standards attract significant events, like the 12th Congress of the European Academy of Neurology (EAN), or the WAIPA World Investment Conference 2026. Strategically located in the heart of Europe, Geneva offers stunning views of Lake Geneva and the Alps. An efficient public transport system free for congress delegates facilitates easy navigation. When organising a congress in Geneva, associations enjoy a smooth and stress-free event management experience and provide delegates with a unique and memorable set-up to meet, exchange and connect.



Learn more on the Geneva Convention Bureau website and get in touch with the team.

MORE INFORMATION

CONTACT

GENEVA
CONVENTION BUREAU


SAVOIE