

LEARNING FROM CRISIS

A series of modular learnings from the 2017-2018
Cape Town water crisis

☺☺☺ THE RESILIENCE SHIFT

THE CAPE TOWN
DROUGHT RESPONSE
LEARNING INITIATIVE

module

14

Suspend the politics

The normal rules of political interaction need to be suspended during crisis periods in order to have a coherent response. The line between governance and politics should not be blurred. Leadership is key.

Suspend the politics

The Cape Town water crisis played out against the backdrop of party-political battles, which in some instances affected government decisions and actions. The experience demonstrated just how counterproductive and destructive such politicking can be in a crisis. It confuses, delays, complicates, and leads to point-scoring. When people are fighting and are trying to win political points, they are not going to be aligned on their messaging, with a consequent loss of credibility. Instead of people putting aside their differences and pulling together to resolve the crisis, the crisis itself becomes a political pawn in the continuation of pre-existing battles. The normal rules of political interaction need to be suspended during crisis periods in order to have a coherent response. You need clear mandates and clear leadership. You need clear lines of political authority and clear lines of communication. The boundary between politics and governance should not be blurred. Institutions straddling the public and private divide can help to build social cohesion. In the end it boils down to having strong leadership in place, and the right kind of leadership.



When you're in a crisis, you cannot afford to have political fighting taking place

Bronwyn Nortje

You have to set your politics aside and focus on the solutions

Alderman Ian Neilson

The normal rules of political interaction need to be suspended for those crises in order to have a coherent response

Mike Mulcahy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Cape Town water crisis played out against the backdrop of party-political battles, which in some instances affected government decisions and actions
- Politics makes it much more difficult to achieve anything: when people are fighting and are trying to win political points, they are not going to be aligned on their messaging, and when they're not aligned on their messaging, they lose credibility
- Politicking confuses, delays, complicates, and leads to point-scoring; the water crisis was to some extent used as a political pawn by parties to show either how good they were or how bad their opponents were
- Politics initially prevented the release of some information as there was concern about exposing the severity of the situation; when politics died down a bit and engineers could come forward with the facts, things improved
- Business has no real regard for or interest in politics, for which person or what entity was responsible for the situation or for failures; business just needs the facts, needs to know what government is doing, so that it can decide its own actions
- All spheres of government – local, provincial and national – must get together, set their politics aside and focus on the solutions; the different users – various municipalities and agriculture – must do the same
- The technical people should recognise and push back against attempts by politicians to promote solutions that have political advantages for the politicians, as opposed to technically sound, engineered solutions
- The normal rules of political interaction need to be suspended during crisis periods in order to have a coherent response, where resources are coordinated to point in the same direction to respond to the crisis
- You need clear mandates and clear leadership
- You need clear lines of political authority and clear lines of communication
- Do not blur the lines between politics and governance
- Institutions straddling the public and private divide can help to build social cohesion
- In the end it boils down to strong leadership, and the right kind of leadership

Interviewees in order of appearance:**Bronwyn Nortje**

Independent corporate affairs consultant

Alderman Ian Neilson

Deputy Mayor: City of Cape Town

Mike Mulcahy

CEO: GreenCape

Mike Spicer

Deputy chairman: Wesgro

Claire Pengelly

Water programme manager: GreenCape

Helen Davies

Chief Director: Green Economy, Western Cape Government

Peter Flower

Recently retired Director: Water and Sanitation, City of Cape Town

Carl Opperman

CEO: Agri Wes Cape

Full interviews on [Cape Town Drought Response Learning Initiative](#) website

Opinions expressed by interviewees are personal viewpoints
and do not necessarily reflect those of their organisations

STRUCTURE

00:00:05

Hooks:

- When you're in a crisis, you cannot afford political fighting (BN)
- You have to set your politics aside and focus on the solutions (IN)
- Normal rules of political interaction need to be suspended (MM)

00:00:55

HOW NOT TO DO IT: THE IMPACT OF POLITICS DURING THE CRISIS

- Politics makes everything more difficult, makes it much more difficult to achieve anything
- When people are fighting and are trying to win political points, they are not going to be aligned on their messaging, losing credibility (BN)
- Politicking confuses, delays, complicates, leads to point-scoring; perfect storm; reflection on lack of leadership, or wrong kind of leadership (MS)
- Politics initially prevented the release of some information as there was concern about exposing the severity of the situation; when politics died down a bit and engineers could come forward with the facts, things improved (CP)
- Crisis used a political pawn (HD)

00:07:37

BUSINESS'S PERSPECTIVE ON GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

- Business has no real regard for or interest in politics, for who or what entity was responsible for situation or for failures; business just needs the facts, needs to know what government is doing, so that it can decide its own actions (CP)

00:09:00

HOW TO GET IT RIGHT

- All spheres of government, and all users of water, must get together, set their politics aside and focus on the solutions (IN)
- A water safety plan has now been developed and put in place, that will be triggered by predefined conditions
- Technical people should recognise and push back against attempts by politicians to promote solutions that have political advantages for them, as opposed to technically sound, engineered solutions (PF)
- The normal rules of political interaction need to be suspended during crisis periods in order to have a coherent response (MM)
- You need clear mandates and clear leadership (BN)
- Remember: it's a life and death issue for everybody in that area (CO)
- Clear lines of political authority; clear lines of communication; institutions that straddle the public and private divide; this amounts to strong leadership (MS)
- Strong leadership; do not blur lines between politics and governance (BN)

INDEX

- 00:00:55 “I think the greatest learning that anyone who’s been through a process like this could take away is that politics makes everything so much more difficult. So when people are not making decisions for the right reasons, and I mean the blurring between the lines of party and government are always there, but when you’re in a politically fraught environment, that’s fine, things keep going and things will normally keep running and ticking over, but when you’re in a crisis you cannot afford to have political fighting taking place. It just, it makes it so much more difficult to achieve anything.”
- “You have to have alignment on your messaging, if you’re going to achieve something, and as soon as you have people fighting and trying to win political points, they’re not going to be aligned on their message, and as soon as people are not aligned in terms of messaging, they lose credibility. So, for anyone who faces a similar type of crisis or in fact even if you’re just in the normal course of doing business, politics is bad, and either you’ve got to run an authoritarian system where people stick to the message all the time, or you need to run a far more sensitive, empathetic organisation where people naturally, in terms of their selection, and the way that the organisation builds values, that you get agreement, you get a natural homogeneity of views, but if you have a highly politicised environment in a crisis, it’s only going to make things worse.”
- 00:02:43 “Given some of the political battles that were raging, both within the City and between the City and the Province, early on not nearly enough attention was paid, later on too much was paid in sort of particularly concentrated form, and that led to long hiatuses in communication, and when communication came out it was particularly stilted and unsuitable very often for what the public was demanding. Now we live in an age of social media, and it’s instantaneous, if there’s a lull, even for an hour or two, social media fills it, and it fills it with all sorts of really completely poorly informed stories, conspiracy theories, people get onto their soap boxes who know nothing whatsoever, even quite responsible people use it to vent their frustration and anger, so it becomes a very destructive medium. And once you’ve lost control of that, it’s very difficult to recapture the control.”
- “And so, some of the narrative that was going on in the social media wildly exaggerated what was a serious set of circumstances anyway, it put forward solutions that were not remotely solutions, it paid no attention to the financial or economic side to it, it pitted various parts of the community against each other – the rich, the poor – it indulged all sorts of prejudices that people had, it allowed political parties to point-score, so it’s a sort of perfect storm, and it’s a reflection on lack of leadership, or the wrong sort of leadership that it didn’t prevent that from happening or recapture control for quite some time.”

“So, what it illustrates, and it’s just a universal phenomenon, when you have a crisis, you have to have your crisis strategy and your crisis communication plan not only pre thought out, but stress tested. Very clear lines of communication, so that there aren’t conflicting stories, and communication that is frequent, informed, credible, trustworthy, with the right degree of technical content for the different audiences, and instantaneous. Nowadays you can’t delay, you have to be able to communicate, and you can’t have politicking which confuses, delays, complicates, leads to point-scoring. You know, it’s easy to say all of this. It’s sort of plain common sense. But in the heat of the moment it’s very difficult to do it and to do it well.”

00:05:43 “There was kind of political situations that were emerging within the City that meant the release of that kind of information was not really allowed. And as soon as the politics basically died down a little bit, and the engineers could kind of come out and say, look, these are the facts, you know, take them or leave them, but there they are, you know, I’m sorry it’s not pretty, but that’s what they are, and the politicians had to kind of toe the line to a certain extent, that obviously did change. So I think for a while effectively the politics got in the way because there was a lot of concern as to kind of almost exposing the severity of the situation that Cape Town was in.”

00:06:26 “There was a balance being played a lot of the time I think also between politics and different spheres of government using the water crisis as a tool to either show how good they were or how bad someone else was, and that really, that kind of really flies in the face of how to deal with a crisis – rather than everyone coming together and having common messaging, the crisis was used as a bit of a political pawn in some ways.”

00:07:37 “So I think another lesson that emerged from our engagements with business is that they have no real regard, or kind of interest in the politics that are happening, you know, within the City, the Western Cape government, or the national government. You know, for most businesses and citizens government is simply government, right? So there was quite an extended period, particularly towards the end of 2017, of finger-pointing, basically, where Western Cape government was pointing at national government, the Western Cape was looking at the City, the City was pointing fingers, so there was this, there was a lot of kind of, basically point-scoring that was going on, political point-scoring, but for a business, we don’t care that, you know, this person hasn’t fulfilled their responsibilities, and this government entity hasn’t come to and responded quickly enough. Like, what are you guys actually *doing*? And how do we respond to that? So I think that was also one of the key learnings is that in terms of a business’s understanding of government mandates and different organisations and things like that – there’s very little regard for that. It’s, you know, just give us the picture, so we can work with the reality, and make our decisions on that basis.”

- 00:09:00 “Well I think the key issue is, first of all, all spheres of government must get together, irrespective of who they are. You have to set your politics aside and focus on the solutions. And everyone who has a responsibility must come to the party. That was very patchy early on in this crisis, but I think towards the end of the crisis the different spheres of government were working together quite well, and we’ve learnt from that, and it’s not only the spheres of government, it’s all the users, for example, the relationships between the different users, the urban sector, the agricultural sector. We have to go forward together on this, planning into the future, the management of these systems, because if it fails for one it fails for all of us. So that’s now, to get our systems in place, to get the structure in place, where there is ongoing meaningful communication and decision making and negotiation around the operations of these systems.”
- 00:10:21 “Now, I think in hindsight for the City, we’ve developed plans to put into place once certain trigger points are reached, so that there’s not just a new thinking how to deal with it taking place at the time when it’s already happening. So that you prepare a plan to put into effect once certain conditions arrive, so I think that’s important, that’s effectively a water safety plan for drought conditions. I would say that that is really important to try and achieve.”
- “In terms of the political side, is to recognise it could be a big influence if you don’t resist the, let’s say the temptation of politicians to take what could be seen to be a populist, or you know a route that appeals from their perspective, but doesn’t really meet the needs from a technical solution, engineered solution to the issue at the time.”
- “I’ve interacted with people in similar positions to myself who have gone through these droughts in São Paulo, Cyprus, Australia, and so on, and they all have similar things to say in terms of the impact of political influence in how the crisis was managed, and sometimes made very much more difficult as a result.”
- 00:13:09 “In a world where we will face an increase in quantity and severity of extreme climate events – droughts, earthquakes, hurricanes – we’re going to see consistent pressure being applied to political principals and political executives to be able to deal and manage with these extreme events. The observation from here in Cape Town is that the normal rules of political interaction need to be suspended for those crises in order to have a coherent response. If small, short-term political point-scoring continues to be applied during these crises, it’s extremely difficult to coordinate the response and to coordinate the resources to be able to point them in the same direction to respond to that crisis.”
- 00:14:17 “When you come into a situation like this, where there is a crisis, you need to have either a very clear mandate, or very clear leadership. In retrospect I think one of the biggest eye-openers was the fact that there were people who were involved

in this water crisis who were prepared to allow a humanitarian crisis in order to score political points. And that's completely unacceptable.”

00:14:46 “There's one important lesson here: when you're in a crisis like this, and you're in government, you manage the crisis, no politics. This is not a political issue. It's a life and death issue, for everybody, every industry, in that area.”

00:15:13 What lesson could other cities or regions derive from Cape Town's experience? “Firstly you must have clear lines of political authority. Do not have compromised, fractured, conflicting lines of authority, where it's not clear who's in charge and who is responsible. Have clear lines of communication. You've got to have one set of key communicators, who have authority but also the ability to speak to complex situations, complexity, but simply and with authority. Thirdly to have institutions that straddle the public and the private divides, and build social cohesion. All of this amounts of course to asking for leadership, leadership with qualities that are sort of battle tried and tested, that have experience, but also that have empathy, the ability to see a big picture, to understand what drives other sectors of society, and to listen to them. Good leaders of course put their ego aside, are able to understand others, to listen to them, to empathise with them, and then to work collaboratively – it's not the natural position, but I think these lessons, I mean there's nothing new or nothing particularly startling, but it's remarkable how seldom it all comes together.”

00:16:56 “That's why you've got to have strong leadership. I don't think we would have ended up in this situation in the first place had there been strong political leadership, and had the lines between politics and governance been blurred quite as much as they have. It's tolerable for a short period of time when there isn't a crisis, but as soon as there is a crisis, you have to, you have to suspend the politics.”

Source material from the Cape Town Drought Response Film Library,
a research resource of the University of Cape Town's African Climate and Development Initiative



The film library was established with the generous financial support of:
The Resilience Shift, Old Mutual, Nedbank, Woolworths, Aurecon, PwC, Arup, GreenCape and 100 Resilient Cities

Produced by the [Cape Town Drought Response Learning Initiative](#) for [The Resilience Shift](#)

Interviewer: [Peter Willis](#)

Film and text: [Victor van Aswegen](#)

11 March 2020