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PRISM CYBER
BY CUBE NETWORKS

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Crisis Ready – Why Calm Is the Leadership Skill That Changes Everything

When I talk to executives about cyber crisis management, most point to a plan. It's documented. It's approved. Sometimes it's even rehearsed.

And in the real world, it often fails.

The reason isn't a lack of technical detail: it's that a cyber crisis isn't just a technical event, it's also a human one, and when pressure spikes (as it invariably does), people default to habit and learned behaviours. Leaders revert to their comfort zones, which for CISOs is often back into the weeds. For other executives, it can mean freezing, or making decisions too quickly.

That's why calm is not just a nice-to-have. I believe that in a crisis, it's your most valuable leadership skill.

The human factor in a cyber incident

In those moments, calm leaders are able to:

- Focus decision making to ensure it remains aligned to the right priorities.
- Create clarity for teams under stress, both in the Crisis Team and the operational teams.
- Maintain trust with stakeholders.

Don't make the mistake of thinking this is about being passive – it's definitely not. Calm leadership is very, very, active. But it's also focused, and it can be contagious.

Why most crisis simulations don't prepare you

Many organisations run table-top exercises and simulations, often at the behest of the board. Then although the executive and key stakeholders able to report their activity, they miss out on the real benefit because most are too neat, too controlled.

A real cyber incident isn't calm: phones are ringing, media is calling, and regulators are demanding answers. Every minute feels expensive. That emotional pressure changes behaviour, so if you want a simulation to prepare your leaders, you have to make it realistic. That means:

- Time pressure is applied.
- Incomplete data is all that is provided.
- Conflicting priorities are generated, and
- There are realistic consequences for poor decisions (in the form of closed off options).

The goal isn't to embarrass anyone or make them feel incompetent. It's to help the whole Crisis Management Team build the skills that you can only learn in that sort of an environment, such as alignment and teamwork under pressure, clear and concise communications, and rapid but considered decision-making that's going to be defensible.

The CISO's key shift: from technician to leader

For many CISOs, the instinct during a crisis is to drop into technical mode. I'm sure we've all been there (I definitely have!). It feels safe, because you know that world and you can exert control.

But in a major incident, your team doesn't need you on the keyboard. They need you leading:

- Making sure the executive team stays aligned.
- Translating technical status into clear business impact.
- Keeping the response moving without losing control.

This is harder than it sounds, because it requires trust: trust in your team's technical capability, and trust in your own ability to lead when you can't fix it yourself.

Building calm leadership before you need it

It's said that a crisis is not the time to write or rehearse your Crisis Management Plan, and by extension I'd say that you can't learn calm in the middle of a crisis! You have to build it, and practice it, ahead of time.

Here's a few ideas of where to start:

1. Simulate the real thing: Bring pressure, noise, and uncertainty into your exercises.
2. Train together: Include executives, communications, legal, and operations. Cyber incidents are business incidents.
3. Debrief with honesty: Look beyond process gaps to behavioural patterns.
4. Practise presence daily: How you show up on a normal Tuesday is how you'll show up in a crisis.

Resilience isn't an assumption

It's easy to assume your team will perform well under pressure. It's much harder to test that assumption, but that's exactly what resilience requires, preparing the human element as rigorously as you prepare your technical controls.

At this year's AISA CyberCon Melbourne, I'll be sharing a practical model for leading through chaos in my session: "Crisis Ready: Why Calm Is a Leadership Skill". In that session I'll be using my experiences and that of others to help you to formulate your plan for building a calm approach to a cyber crisis.

If you're responsible for leading when things go wrong, whether you're a CISO, an executive, or part of an incident response team, this session will give you some tools you can start applying the moment you leave the room.

Because when the worst day comes, it won't be the plan that saves you. It will be the people, and the leaders, who can stay calm enough to make it work.

