

LEADERSHIP IN CRISIS INTERVENTION TEAMS – A BRIEF CONCEPT

Crisis intervention teams provide psychosocial acute support in situations of extreme stress, emotional crisis, and increased vulnerability of affected individuals. These interventions often occur under significant time pressure, with incomplete information, and within environments characterized by high emotional intensity. In addition to the professional competence of individual CISM team members, professional, reliable, and reflective leadership is therefore of central importance. Leadership forms the foundation for effective interventions, stable team processes, and the sustainable protection of the mental health of staff members.

In practice, the importance of leadership in psychosocial crisis intervention teams is often underestimated or addressed only implicitly. Leadership frequently emerges from the commitment or experience of individual persons, without the presence of a systematic concept, clearly defined responsibilities, or binding quality standards. At the same time, experience from high-stress systems demonstrates that insufficient or inconsistent leadership significantly increases the risk of poor decision-making, team conflict, and long-term psychological consequences. The aim of this concept paper is therefore to situate leadership within psychosocial crisis intervention, identify core requirements, and outline structured areas for action.

Crisis intervention teams are specialized units providing short-term psychosocial support to individuals following sudden deaths, severe accidents, violent incidents, or other acute crisis situations. The objective of these interventions is emotional stabilization, the promotion of orientation, and the support of natural coping processes. This work often takes place within interdisciplinary structures and requires a high degree of flexibility, empathy, and professional distance. Leaders in this context operate at the intersection of clinical responsibility, organizational coordination, and psychosocial care.

Leadership in this setting fulfills multiple functions simultaneously. On the one

hand, leadership guides operational deployment, makes decisions, and ensures professional standards. On the other hand, it shapes team culture, fosters trust, and supports the processing of stress experienced by staff members. Effective leadership helps reduce uncertainty, provides orientation, and establishes a shared professional mindset. Leadership therefore influences not only the quality of individual deployments but also the long-term performance and sustainability of the entire system.

A central prerequisite for effective leadership is professional competence. Leaders in crisis intervention teams must possess sound knowledge in the fields of psychotraumatology, crisis psychology, psychosocial emergency care, and relevant legal and ethical frameworks. In addition, familiarity with current scientific research, theoretical models, and evidence-based intervention approaches is essential. Leaders serve as professional reference points and bear responsibility for ensuring that knowledge is continuously updated and translated into practice.

Because social conditions, deployment scenarios, and scientific insights constantly evolve, professional competence cannot be regarded as static. Leadership in this sense also means regularly reflecting on one's own knowledge, actively engaging in continuing education, and promoting ongoing learning within the team. A leadership culture oriented toward learning strengthens professionalism, decision-making confidence, and quality assurance.

In addition to knowledge, practical experience constitutes another core foundation of effective leadership. Crisis situations require rapid action under uncertain conditions and the ability to make clear decisions despite high emotional strain. Leaders must be capable of quickly assessing complex situations, prioritizing relevant information, and assuming responsibility for decisions. Experience supports both situational assessment and realistic evaluation of stress limits.

Decision-making competence in this context does not imply authoritarian leadership, but rather transparent, well-reasoned, and comprehensible decisions. Leaders are required to communicate decisions clearly, assume responsibility for outcomes, and revise decisions when necessary. Reflective capacity and willingness to learn are just as important as assertiveness.

Another central dimension of leadership in crisis intervention teams is responsibility for the well-being of team members. Repeated exposure to death, suffering, and exceptional situations poses a significant risk of psychological distress. Leaders have a duty of care that extends beyond organizational matters and includes the mental health of their staff.

Care-oriented leadership is expressed through appreciation, open communication, and the deliberate acknowledgment of individual stress. Leaders must be able to recognize and address warning signs of overload. This also includes legitimizing breaks, relief, or temporary withdrawal from deployments. Such an approach makes a substantial contribution to the prevention of burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and long-term withdrawal from crisis intervention work.

A key area of professional leadership is the development of reliable training and qualification structures. Basic training forms the foundation of professional crisis intervention work and must be evidence-based, practice-oriented, and standardized. Leaders are responsible for maintaining the quality of training programs and for conveying shared values and professional attitudes.

In addition to initial training, continuous education and professional development are indispensable. Regular refresher trainings serve to update knowledge, reflect practical experience, and ensure consistency in procedures. In addition, advanced masterclass formats facilitate in-depth engagement with specialized topics, new research findings, or complex deployment scenarios. Leadership includes the responsibility to strategically plan and make these opportunities accessible.

Team debriefings represent a core instrument of post-deployment follow-up and constitute a central leadership task. Structured debriefings allow for professional reflection on deployments, processing of emotional impressions, and shared learning. Effective debriefings enhance transparency, strengthen team cohesion, and contribute to quality assurance. Leaders must create a safe environment in which both factual and emotional aspects can be addressed.

Beyond short-term debriefings, regular professional supervision is an essential component of sustainable crisis intervention work. Supervision provides a

space for in-depth reflection, the processing of recurring stress patterns, and the further development of professional competence. Leaders bear responsibility for establishing and valuing supervision as a fixed component of organizational practice. Leaders themselves benefit from supervision by reflecting on their roles, decisions, and personal stress.

The implementation of a professional leadership concept requires clear organizational prerequisites. These include defined roles, transparent decision-making pathways, and sufficient temporal and personnel resources. Leadership must not depend solely on individual commitment, but rather be structurally embedded. This poses particular challenges in volunteer-based systems.

Key success factors for effective leadership structures include clear communication, continuous qualification, and organization-wide recognition of the importance of leadership. Sponsoring organizations are called upon to understand leadership as an integral component of crisis intervention and to support it accordingly.

In conclusion, leadership is a central success factor for the quality and sustainability of psychosocial crisis intervention. Effective leadership integrates professional competence, decision-making reliability, and a strong care orientation. It creates structures that enable professional practice, reduce stress, and ensure long-term team stability. Organizations are encouraged to systematically promote leadership and to anchor it permanently through training, continuing education, debriefing, and supervision.

©Joerg Leonhardt,
email: joerg.leonhardt@outlook.com