

*The National
Academies of*

SCIENCES
ENGINEERING
MEDICINE

FORUM ON MEDICAL AND PUBLIC HEALTH PREPAREDNESS FOR DISASTERS AND EMERGENCIES

July 16, 2026

LEADERSHIP VACUUMS IN TIMES OF CRISIS:

What are They and
How to Get Beyond Them



Leonard J. Marcus, Ph.D.

Director, National Preparedness Leadership Initiative at Harvard University

LEADERSHIP VACUUMS & THEIR IMPLICATIONS

Void in key leadership decision-making, guidance, direction, or authority

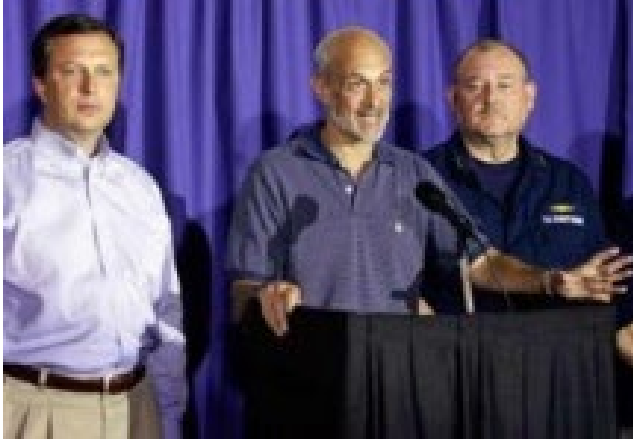
Deficiencies occur in critical information/data, actions, expertise, communication, and resource deployment

Adverse impact on response effectiveness.

“Nature abhors a vacuum”
Aristotle

What is the Result?
How is the Vacuum Filled?

CRISIS LEADERSHIP FIELD RESEARCH



Hurricane Katrina
2005



Ebola
2014

H1N1
2010



CRISIS LEADERSHIP FIELD RESEARCH



COVID-19
2020



MPOX
2022



Key Bridge Collapse
2024

LEADERSHIP VACUUMS & CRISIS

Today,
the country and world face
significant leadership vacuums
in time-honored,
formal, &
established
public health guidance and response.

HOW ARE THESE LEADERSHIP VACUUMS BEING FILLED?

(a partial list)

- Expert blogs and information by individuals & organizations
- Professional society guidance and leadership: Trusted resources
- Ad Hoc coalitions: New England PH Collaborative
- Media, advocacy, protest, organizing
- Health care organization community support
- Humanitarian organizations filling the gaps
- City and State government, businesses, and faith-based organizations together assume new responsibilities

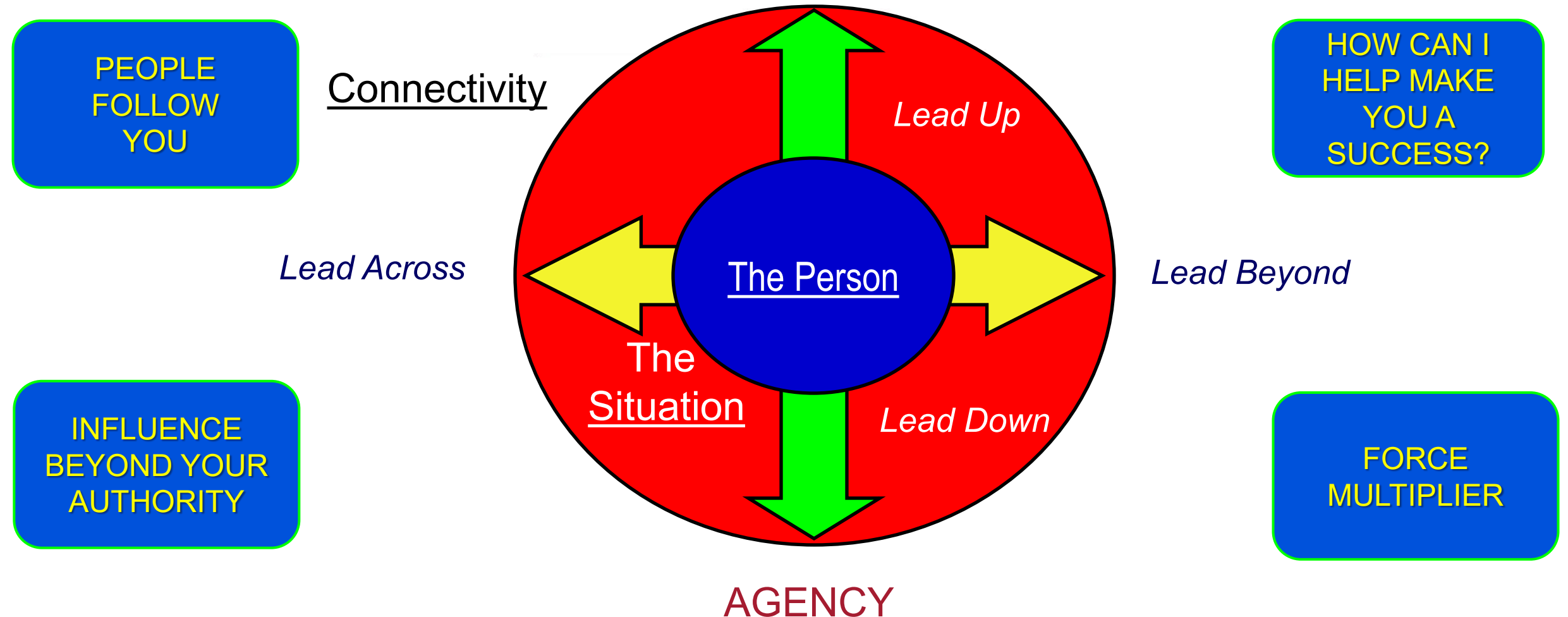
THE IMMEDIATE ROAD AHEAD



THE MISSION FOR THE FIELD:
IDENTIFYING, FILLING, AND
COLLABORATING TO FILL THESE
PUBLIC HEALTH LEADERSHIP VACUUMS

Doing so will require
Commitment, Courage, Innovation, Connectivity, and
LEADERSHIP

THE THINKING & PRACTICE OF META-LEADERSHIP



THE BOSTON MARATHON BOMBING RESPONSE

SWARM LEADERSHIP

LEADERSHIP TO FILL CURRENT VACUUMS



1. Unity of Mission
2. Generosity of Spirit and Action
3. Stay in Lanes/Help Others Succeed
4. No Ego – No Blame
5. A Foundation of Trusting Relationships

*The National
Academies of*

SCIENCES
ENGINEERING
MEDICINE

FORUM ON MEDICAL AND PUBLIC HEALTH PREPAREDNESS FOR DISASTERS AND EMERGENCIES

July 16, 2026

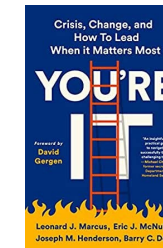
LEADERSHIP VACUUMS IN TIMES OF CRISIS:

What are They and
How to Get Beyond Them



<https://npli.sph.harvard.edu/>
Harvard NPLI You Tube

ljmarcus@hsph.harvard.edu



Leonard J. Marcus, Ph.D.

Director, National Preparedness Leadership Initiative at Harvard University

