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Signal to Noise

A quarter for your thoughts on crisis management



By [Robert J. Terry](#) – Senior Staff Reporter, Washington Business Journal
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Managers everywhere can relate to this: You beat back a competitive threat, a technological hurdle or a personnel challenge. You start to think you're a pretty good crisis manager.

You do it with confidence, maybe even a well-placed sense of humor that deflates tension, and you fancy yourself an organizational leader in the making. You get positive feedback from your boss. It's a nice ego boost.

Then your 5-year-old son swallows a quarter and any notions of being an organization's Winston Wolfe vanish faster than you can say "Monster Joe's Truck and Tow."

This was my lot in life a couple weeks ago. I found Zach with an alarmed look on his face. He was talking fine. Swallowing fine. Breathing fine. But clearly scared –

of the quarter's effects or my suddenly darkened mood I cannot say.

Why had he done this? To see what it tasted like, naturally.

I'd somehow gone almost 10 years and three children without a trip to the ER. Now my son had accidentally swallowed something that seemed, to my untrained eye, too big for his windpipe. I was concerned, mad, full of second guesses and not managing this situation very well.

Let's consider my crisis management missteps, courtesy of the leadership competencies identified by Erika Hayes James, an organizational psychologist at the University of Virginia. I was not building an environment of trust or reforming the organization's mindset – I was too busy yelling for that. I also wasn't in the right frame of mind to make wise and rapid decisions.

I needed to chill. Zach would be fine. The jokes started rolling in when I put the word out to family and friends. "This doesn't make any cents!" wrote my dad, who can't resist a cheesy pun.

I needed to quit beating myself up and move on. This too shall pass.

(Sorry, I can't help myself either.)