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## **Leadership During a Crisis**

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by **Wayne Corneil, Louise Lemyre and Melanie Clement**

BOMBINGS IN LONDON AND MADRID, THE TSUNAMI IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, SARS – ALL ARE HORRIFIC REMINDERS THAT NO LEADER CAN AFFORD TO BE UNPREPARED. IN TIMES OF CRISIS, PEOPLE LOOK TO THE PUBLIC SECTOR FOR LEADERSHIP. GOVERNMENT EXECUTIVES BECOME THE FOCAL POINT AT THE CENTRE OF THE STORM – A CLUSTER OF POLITICAL, ETHICAL AND SOCIAL-WELFARE DECISIONS HAVE TO BE MADE IMMEDIATELY UNDER EXTRAORDINARY STRESS.

In the aftermath of 9/11, New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani set the bar high. In such unimaginable moments, leaders must respond to situations beyond the scope of their immediate experience. They must reach coherent decisions under pressure; define and guide the actions of a wide range of people; and be prepared to cross geographic and jurisdictional boundaries to manage comprehensive, multi-agency and jurisdictional responses.

Research on recent terror events has identified key leadership challenges.

1. Inability to plan for every contingency: Not all contingencies can be anticipated. The information required to map and manage an emergency must be gleaned from disparate institutions in multiple jurisdictions before it can be analyzed. Tactics may change as the situation unfolds.
2. Unpredictable, rapid and far-reaching impacts in a networked world: Terror events can generate anxiety and broad indirect effects in distant places.
3. Scarcity of resources: Rationing, inability to respond to everyone while resources are put in place, and temporary shortages heighten the public's sense of vulnerability.
4. Social effects: The search for who to blame and how to regain control can lead to alienation, prejudice, and loss of faith in leaders.

The effectiveness of an emergency response is directly linked to the quality of the teams on the ground. And the success of those teams is inherently tied to the competence and effectiveness of its leader: Strengthen the leadership, strengthen the team.

### **UNDERMINING LEADERSHIP**

Emergencies are characterized by rapidly changing conditions, complex and often insecure environments and competing urgent priorities. Teams must be formed quickly; planning must be managed while concurrently responding; decision-making must be fast in the face of confusing and conflicting information.

For an emergency management group, the typical everyday resources are often insufficient for coping with the situation. It is easy to become absorbed by the crisis and neglect the ordinary day-to-day business, which has to continue to maintain social infrastructure and public good. The invasive qualities of a crisis restrict free and explorative thinking and perception soon becomes rigid and limited; leaders then focus

on physical rather than analytical efforts. Previous events have shown that becoming operative instead of working at a tactical level is the most frequent stress response among leaders and limits their ability to provide leadership, particularly strategic direction to resolve the event.

Harvard University JFK School of Government has identified the key qualities of effective leadership for emergency management as: creativity, improvisation, imagination and adaptability. These qualities are not the first that would spring to the minds of many, are not normally encouraged in public organizations and few management development programs focus on emergency situations in training leaders.

#### INCIDENT MANAGEMENT

Effective preparation, detection and response will always depend on formal organizations. But complex organizations tend for good reason not to be fleet of foot and nimble of mind – precisely the qualities we need most in a terrorist event.

The normal routine of government departments is much like an orchestra where each section has a score to follow. They are compartmentalized but can work together harmoniously to create the desired result. Emergency management calls for a jazz ensemble able to improvise and act both independently and harmoniously.

Unfortunately, there's too much emphasis on issues of command and control, especially at the emergency response level. Command and control works best when all tasks are contained within the system, which is rarely the case with terrorist incidents. Clear, consistent communication is essential, supported by an incident management system with effective information processing. If all players do not have a common approach to enable consistent communications among themselves and with the public, the public will seek information from a variety of sources. And where there is contradictory information coming from different levels of government, public trust quickly erodes.

Incident management is an active planning process that allows proactive development of response objectives, strategies, and priorities. Risk communication is a scientifically based method for communicating effectively under high-threat conditions. Naylor noted that many of the difficulties in the SARS outbreak could have been avoided with a clear information management system.

#### THE MYTH OF PANIC

Researchers know a great deal about how people respond to disasters, but we have failed to properly communicate this knowledge to officials. The result has been the perpetuation of the fear of public panic. Studies of population responses to disasters over the past five decades suggest that panic rarely occurs. By panic, we mean people taking actions that harm themselves and others, and engaging in anti-social behaviour.

Decision-makers need to anticipate and modulate their own emotional responses to crisis, taking care not to project their stress, fears, and feelings of inadequacy onto the public. Leaders are often inclined to make reassuring statements prematurely to avoid

unnecessary alarm or a secondary ‘disaster’ (e.g., people fleeing an area and clogging highways). But downplaying danger when its extent is not yet known tends to make subsequent statements suspect, especially when the peril is real and even greater than anticipated.

Fear is an appropriate reaction, it keeps people safe and healthy, and decision-makers should not assume the public is panicking by seeking more information or taking precautionary measures (even if officials deem these unwarranted). A fearless leader is of no help – the public can't follow. A leader who is fearful and bears it, and makes decisions while acknowledging that fear, is far more effective.

## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The current, professionalized model of response to disaster has largely cast the civilian population as nonparticipants. There is a myth that the general public tends to be irrational, uncoordinated, and uncooperative in emergencies. The first responders to emergencies are always seen as officials and organizations, but it is often the person in the street who is first on the scene – the passenger on the airplane, the teacher in the school. Disaster response is largely a local affair. People help people – from the ice storm to subway bombings.

As response planning evolves, it is important to develop strategies that enlist the public as essential and capable partners. Terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, Bali, Madrid and London all draw attention to the important role of nonprofessionals in the immediate and long-term response to disasters with mass casualties.

A well-informed population is more likely to cooperate. Authorities should thus make response plans known in advance of crises. If leaders expect residents to take specific actions when an event occurs, then the public must have a general understanding of the systems in place, and they must have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

Officials may believe that they are protecting the public by withholding information regarding response plans on the theory that revealing these plans will show potential attackers where they can strike most effectively. That assessment ignores evidence from the attacks since 2001 that determined terrorists will identify vulnerabilities that are unknown to the public. More important, it ignores the role that citizens can and should play in helping set national and local priorities.

## PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS

At the very outset of a disaster, leaders should prepare the community for conditions of uncertainty and a potentially prolonged crisis. Realistic descriptions can offset public perceptions. Following the 9/11 attacks, Mayor Giuliani exemplified what leaders should do when faced with uncertainty. Able to offer only a rough estimate of casualties early on, he indicated there would be “more than any of us can bear, ultimately.” Officials should be candid, discussing frankly the limits of their knowledge and describing plans to fill in gaps. Each official action primes conditions for future public expectations and

reactions.

Decades of research shows members of the public are capable of understanding risks if information about those risks is communicated in ways that they find meaningful. Effective public communication means effective partnerships with media. There is a tendency to view the press as an impediment to emergency response. When an event occurs, leaders often believe that they are too busy managing the response to spend time with the press and, by extension, the public. However, given the speed with which news reports circulate, and the importance of media in shaping public responses, department officials need to be responsive to media requests for information.

The groundwork for an effective relationship should be laid well in advance, through more routine interactions with reporters, producers and editorial boards, and by incorporating the press in training exercises. Mass media outlets can get vital information to the largest numbers of people the most quickly. Grassroots civic leaders and smaller media outlets serving ethnic minority and immigrant communities offer a critical route for reaching populations that either do not routinely use or do not trust mainstream media, or who are suspicious of official government pronouncements.

## CONNECTIVITY

To advance emergency preparedness, senior government officials must extend beyond their normal boundaries to link their strategic thinking, planning, and activities to those in other organizations and jurisdictions. No easy task, this requires a frame of mind that runs counter to traditional divisions of jurisdiction. This new 'connectivity' requires leaders to focus on the 'good of the whole' to generate quick, proactive and pragmatic national, provincial and local preparedness. Connectivity is vertical among levels of government and horizontal among departments and agencies.

This cross-organizational reach is a key feature of preparedness leadership. For example, in order to develop both vertical and horizontal integration, how do you build response systems that rely upon a combination of voluntary consensus and different lines of authority and control? How do leaders cope with the ethical dimensions of their decisions? Leaders will face choices of triage and priority setting with little time for self-reflection.

## CONCLUSION

Leadership during natural disasters and terrorist events entails consciously pursuing and institutionalizing a sense of shared responsibility – among leaders, between leaders and the public, and among community members themselves.

Principles for achieving this include approaching the public as a capable ally, not as a problem that needs managing; keeping responses transparent through open channels with the media and a community's other trusted sources; and sharing difficult decisions when they arise. Both public cooperation and enhancement of emergency policies and the community's ability to rebound from tragedy will be enhanced if people have been forewarned and involved. Promoting the connectivity across departments and

jurisdictional levels and working to overcome trends of disenfranchisement also provide a solid societal foundation for responding to any major disaster.

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