



Leadership Training

Leadership Crisis in Emergency Management: A Case for Investment in Leadership Training

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Abstract:

Although we cannot prevent most disasters, especially natural disasters, we can at least train and prepare people who will lead us effectively in the event of any disasters. This is a full-time job which requires more than the usual training. The nature and variety of these disasters call for full time leaders who have dedicated themselves to the concept of leadership under crises. Emergencies call for more than normal leaders, but the types of seasoned leaders who can work well under pressure and act like a center of attraction for people to look up to for enlightenment and direction. Appointments to such positions should be void of political considerations or leanings, but on expertise, know-how and those qualities acquired through learning, experience and daily relationships built on trust and confidence. This was the case at the Pentagon on 9-11, which did much to reduce the magnitude of loss, confusion, and conflict. Senator Joe Liebermann pointed out very clearly the need for greater and more effective leadership in times of crisis when he said “One thing that I have found is a strong correlation between effective leadership and effective response. Unfortunately, I have also found the reverse to be true” (Senate Hearing., p. 3).

The increase and prevalence of natural disasters, especially beginning with the Katrina and Rita Hurricanes in the Gulf Coast and the destructive results of the tsunamis, continue to baffle us when we think of the losses suffered. According to Nwanna (2004), De Villeirs (2008), Ripley (2008) and Haddow, Bullock, & Coppola (2011), everyday some new disaster comes up and as the seasons change and global warming continues, so do these natural disasters increase. Coupled with these natural disasters is the continuous threats and fears of man-made disasters in the form of chemical accidents, the collapse of mines, automobile and airplane accidents (9/11

experience) and the looming threat and fear of the terrorists using weapons of mass destruction. Each of these disasters is bound to come with devastating loss of lives and property, some of which are preventable and some of which are not. A few years ago, in particular, the number of destructive tornadoes increased with over 36 deaths already caused. Kentucky, Indiana, Alabama, Missouri, Texas, and some other Midwestern states were particularly hit. Over fifty children and people were killed in Moore in Oklahoma when a tornado hid the city destroying the entire city and the primary school. These events, especially the local responses to them, showed how ill-prepared we are for natural disasters, because of poor and sometimes lack of leadership in handling these situations. There is therefore a great need for strong and decisive leaders who are knowledgeable and aware of details, who are open to other opinions and collaborative efforts of local emergency staff, and more importantly, and who have gained power not through bullying but because they are calm and credible.

To effectively talk about these leadership skills, we have to look back at how America responded to some of the worst emergencies that took place not too long ago and how these events revealed the lack of the caliber of leadership needed. In February 2012 and also last year, we witnessed some of the worst emergencies in our history, with the exceptions of 9-11 and the Oklahoma City bombing. In these situations, and as television channels depicted, we saw isolated cases of individual heroism, survival, and individual resilience. In Liberty, Western Kentucky, the Mayor who doubled also as the Court Judge was seen moving around and inspecting the devastation caused by the tornado. He braved the bad weather to encourage his local people to wake up to the reality of the situation and help rebuild the city. In 2011, First Baptist Church of Orangeburg, South Carolina, where I worshipped, raised money and collected clothes, canned and non-perishable foods and water for the disaster victims in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. These were

activities initiated and carried out by charitable and non-profit organizations. Unfortunately, some of these supplies collected were not properly handled or equitably distributed because the distribution activities were not clearly mapped out by strong leadership on the ground.

In fact, I was attracted to this Homeland Security Management because I saw the need for a broader and more comprehensive approach to these disasters, especially after watching the 9/11 events live and seeing the confusion into which the cities (New York and Washington, D.C.) and the entire US were thrown. According to Haddow, Bullock & Coppola (2011), these attacks constituted “the first national disaster event to have occurred in the United States outside of wartime.... leaving all communities with a lingering sense of vulnerability” (302). Furthermore, the failure of the Michael Brown administration to successfully manage the Katrina disaster in New Orleans, Louisiana in 2005 again re-emphasized the need for a greater and urgent re-thinking of leadership in disaster management. The February 10, 2006 Congressional Hearing entitled “Hurricane Katrina: The roles of US Department of Homeland Security and Federal Emergency Management Agency leadership” (S. Hrg 109-829) was specifically dedicated to the scrutiny of the failure of leadership in the pre- and post-Katrina hurricane disaster management. It also called for the need for regionalization of disaster control and management based on the knowledge of local geopolitics and local logistics. As we watch CNN and other local and national television and radio stations, we find a consistent lack of sustained and organized body of policies and leadership put in place to handle all these emergencies. The various states have come up with individual blueprints and agendas for emergency management in response to the absence of any comprehensive plan that is federal since by its very nature disasters are localized and vary in terms of their nature: earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis, WMD, terrorism, wild fires, avalanches, just to name a few (Steven & Gunaratna 2004, Nwana 2004). But there is one

constance in all these situations- the need for strong and effective leadership to take care of mitigation and preparation for management of disaster event and recovery efforts.

Since these disasters and emergencies seem to be increasing exponentially, there is an urgent need to accelerate the training and deployment of great leaders of disaster respond teams throughout each state in preparation of responses to natural disasters. In fact, the State of South Carolina has budgeted a reasonable sum of money in this venture, after identifying that training and strong leadership are key components to any successful operations during emergencies (Healy 1012). There is also a greater need to prepare and train leaders to coordinate activities during emergencies and natural disasters, leaders who do not bully their way into power, but get the power and respect because they are calm and credible, they are knowledgeable, aware of details, and decisive, and finally leaders who are open to other opinions and can rely on subordinates in times of emergencies to do their job.

As we look back at the response to Katrina and Rita, it is obvious that Michael Brown, the then director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was almost an absent manager who flew to the scene of emergency rather late and unprepared. He definitely lacked the knowledge and awareness of the details of the enormity of the disaster, and that is why he assured the world that the situation was under control. Yet, people were drowning and dying without help. He could not function well without the assistance of the local leaders who were themselves overwhelmed by the disaster. During the Congressional hearing of Friday, February 10, 2006, Michael Brown admitted to this leadership failure, but maintained that FEMA's mission had been marginalized. Its response capability had been diminished. "There is a whole clash of cultures between DHS's mission to prevent terrorism and FEMA's mission to respond to and to prepare for responding to disasters of whatever nature" (US Senate Hearing,

p.2). Probably, one of the reasons for the confusion that ensued from the 9/11 Ground-Zero disaster was the lack of coordination and leadership. The Post-9/11 First Responder Evaluation report clearly indicates that, in spite of Mayor Rudy Giuliani's brave leadership role, there were major issues of organizational leadership, clarity in the chain of command, lack of more efficient and comprehensive disaster evacuation response plans and leadership. Case after case reveals that determined and knowledgeable leadership is key in every emergency management situation.

During the World Trade Center attack in New York, fire fighters and law officers instinctively dove into the burning buildings to help save lives without any leader handling and directing the operations based on any standard formula for such activities. This experience has given rise to the grave concern for trained leaders in the area of emergency management and natural disasters. A few universities (Kaplan University being one) responded to this discrepancy by designing and offering courses in emergency and disaster management as a practical response to the failures that emanated from the previous natural disasters and how we managed these emergencies. These are positive steps in the right direction, but they are not enough compared to the rate and intensity of the occurrences of disasters that call for immediate action. Such trained leaders should be able to go out into the cities and other areas and train and drill the local folk on how to respond to emergencies and disasters. The wild fires of California continue to destroy human lives, houses and property as well as vegetation yearly. And with al Qaeda threatening to use weapons of mass destruction on us every day, it will be of utmost importance for the society to train on self-survival and how to contend these threats. And this awakening can only be done through strong and visionary leaders and leadership, who are dedicated to their jobs.

Furthermore, every disaster breed groups and groups need leaders (Ripley 2008), who are fully in charge of all operations and who are equipped to direct all operations through a thoroughly calculated plan put in place by experts. Such leaders must be men and women of the people; that is, persons trusted by the people to lead them from danger to safety. Talking about group thinking in times of disaster, Ripley (2008) discussed situations like the burning of the Air France plane on August 2, 2005 (p.132) and the incident of the burning of Beverly Hills (pp.130-133) where strong, decisive and calculated leadership helped save thousands of lives from perdition. Such leaders should be courageous enough to put themselves in danger for the sake of saving their people. Some of these leadership qualities include bravery, moral rectitude, people's skills and the ability to communicate effectively and clearly to a people in the language, style and tone that the people under pressure will understand and follow.

There is the constant bickering over leadership values. Yes, some leaders are made, and others make themselves. Irrespective of how this is done, each leader must stay on top of the new developments in his or her areas. Each natural disaster calls for a particular approach and method and the use of specific equipment and great collaboration with disaster predictors and stakeholders. The leader must constantly acquaint himself or herself with the new equipment and communication gadgets and be alert to how each of them works. There is no point in having the equipment piled up only to discover that none of them works, or that they are all broken down or that the leader does not know how to use them. It was shamefully realized that some of the communication devises failed to work during the 9/11 crisis in New York. The leaders have to go beyond the call of duty and the normal training to stay on top of cutting-edge technology that will be needed in his or her area in times of crisis. President Bill Clinton used to emphasize that to prepare for peace you must be prepared for war. So, the true leader is one

who is always prepared for the surprises that come with these disasters, for many of these emergencies occur without warning. COVID-19, like SARS came unannounced but both of them caught us unprepared. To prepare for these types, the leaders need to work in collaboration with all stakeholders- businesses, social services, medical departments, law enforcement, Salvation Army, local leaders, and schools and organizations that house a significant number of people at a given time. This is when a leader now becomes a facilitator and a coordinator of events.

Good decisive leadership is needed to handle any emergency. Another important lesson learned from Katrina disaster was the fact that the leaders had fore-knowledge of the structural weaknesses of the levees and not enough was done to handle the situation to reduce, if not prevent the devastating results of the hurricane (Haddow, Bullock & Coppola 2011). A strong and decisive leader would have petitioned the local and the federal governments and authorities on the urgent need to invest in re-building or reinforcing the levee walls to assuage the damage that came. This is part of mitigation, which is a strong component of restricting structural and human damage caused by disasters. This was clearly a case of the failure of the Emergency Support Systems (ESF) with adequate knowledge of the needs of the people. Michael Brown and other members of the Congressional Hearing Committee admitted that FEMA was relatively new and was compromised by its affiliation and subservience to the Department of Homeland Security, and the director could not act independently and swiftly in response to these emergencies. Consequently, Mr. Brown and other members of Congress suggested and were leaning towards a better empowerment of leadership through independence. Indeed, Haddow, Bullock and Coppola (2011) have suggested that considering the urgency and prevalence of emergencies and disasters today, the Federal Emergency Management Agency

should be upgraded to a full department of government with its own secretary and budget so as to be able to operate independently of the newly created Department of Homeland Security, which in effect is equally struggling with the department of National Security over autonomy and terrorism. This national leadership will inevitably permeate to the regions, states, counties, and subdivisions, where cells of groups will be created and trained for emergency preparedness and leadership roles. Indeed, the devastating impacts of September 11, 2001 resulted in increased cooperation and collaboration between private business and emergency managers at the local levels (Haddow, Bullock, & Coppola 2011, p. 123), but these collaborations should lead to enhanced preparedness for emergencies. Unfortunately, we are only always awakened to this reality when the disaster has come and gone like in the cases of the wildfires in California, Oregon, and Washington States this year.

The U.S. is rich in the spirit of giving, but some of the gifts hardly reached the targeted destination. A good emergency management leader will set up posts where these supplies will be dropped and effectively distributed. In the instance of a disaster, nearly everybody is confused and panicky, but the true leader will be the one with a level head to calm down all those who are panicking and give the people a sense assurance and of direction on where to get the necessary supplies and which route of survival and evacuation to take. Somebody must be in charge, otherwise everybody will get lost in confusion. This is where the leader has to come up with a road map, evacuation plan, and his or her team ready to go to work immediately. And since disasters are localized, there is a need for the leaders to organize and train local leaders who can and should head each disaster activity as First Responders before the federal agents arrive. This will be tantamount to delegation of powers where the local operators feel and strongly believe that they are part of the national team. It takes a lot of money to do this, but

again this lack of leadership was one of the reasons the 9/11 Commission identified as responsible for the higher number of deaths at Ground Zero in New York City where communication failed and emergency leadership was almost absent. The leader should be empowered to identify and utilize local skills through rigorous training in preparation for natural disasters and emergencies. Emergencies, by their very nature, do not announce their arrival, and that is the more reason such leaders should constantly be on the alert for any eventuality.

Indeed, Senator Lieberman maintained during the Congressional Hearings on the role of US Department of Homeland Security and Federal Emergency Management Agency leadership that “one thing that I have found is a strong correlation between effective leadership and effective response. Unfortunately, I have also found the reverse to be true” (S.H, p.3). This conclusion drawn by Senator Joe Lieberman during the Congressional Hearings laid a high premium on leadership, especially as this statement was made in response to “all the missed opportunities to respond to the levee breaks; and inadequate ability to control inventory and track assets” (pp. 2-3). As we look forward to an increasing number of natural and man-made disasters and emergencies, we need to focus our attention on leadership training. We need to train the sort of leaders who will work in collaboration with weather forecasters, medical authorities and facilities, utility organs and all stakeholders to train the citizens to prepare for disasters, how to comport themselves during disasters and how to pick up pieces of life and continue life after the recovery phase.

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