

The Role of Leadership in Managing Emergencies and Disasters

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Abstract

Leadership in managing disasters and emergencies can minimize the damage inflicted by an event whilst lack of successful leadership exacerbates the impact. Leaders should have certain skills and abilities in order to manage catastrophes based on the environmental conditions, organizations they lead, scope of the disaster. This study provides an overview of the leadership competencies and traits that are necessary for disaster management. A conceptual framework for leadership was provided throughout the research.

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Introduction

Both management of routine emergencies and major catastrophes require a wide array of leadership/management competencies. The goal of emergency management is: "...to devise policy and to implement programs that will reduce vulnerability, limit the loss of life and property, protect the environment, and improve multi-organizational coordination in disasters" (McEntire and Dawson 2007, p. 60). Under the challenging and stressful conditions of emergencies, public expect leaders to manage the incident successfully and move people out of harm's way. Emergencies and crises do not necessarily connote the same meaning. A crisis refers to a broader understanding of events ranging from natural disasters manmade and social problems (Farazmand 2007), while emergencies have a context-specific and relatively narrow meaning. For the purpose of this study, crisis will be mentioned from an emergency management perspective and the terms crisis and emergencies will be used interchangeably.

Crisis and leadership are intertwined in that both concepts have a nature to complement one another. It is the leader's responsibility to respond to the threats and uncertainties stemming from crises. It is the challenge of the leader to bring things back to normal. Despite the negative effects that are present in times of crisis, it is important to acknowledge the fact that crises generate a window of opportunity in which a leader has the chance to reform institutional structures and long-standing policies. According to this "crisis-reform thesis," a leader should avoid being tainted by crises (Boin & t'Hart 2003). In contemporary world, we owe the presence of modern crises to globalization, deregulation, information and communication technology, and developments and technological advances. While these advances promote a close-knit world, one cannot escape the fact that this only makes us all more susceptible to the disastrous impact of even one crisis. When crises are to occur, citizens look to leaders for safety and direction. It is important to note that crises are not events that are neatly delineated, but are rather of high uncertainty.

The study examines the following research questions: What are the expected leadership competencies in managing catastrophic disasters (or extreme events)? Where does the nature of the competencies vary most between emergency management and catastrophic management? We believe that answering these research questions will provide emergency managers and political leaders useable knowledge and examples that can be utilized under stressful conditions. The study provides a conceptual overview of leadership competencies and traits and provides brief examples of leadership failures.

Theoretical Review

A crisis refers to an unforeseen situation. This situation usually is classified as a disaster, catastrophe, threat or urgency. Crises are accompanied by a high degree of uncertainty. The difficult aspects of a crisis are managing its preparation and recovery. Emergency managers must contend with making urgent decisions while information is unavailable. Citizens rely on these government officials to do whatever they can to keep them out of harm's way. This leadership during crises can be defined "as strategic tasks that encompass all activities associated with the stages of crisis management" (Boin et al. 2005, p. 9).

Disasters could be classified into two categories: manmade and natural disasters. Manmade disasters include terror attacks, hazmat spill, sabotage, chemical accidents, or any other disasters that are consequences of actions of human beings. Natural disasters include all natural events such as hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and droughts. In particular, manmade disasters present more in-depth problems for emergency responders. Technological developments open new horizons for better mitigation and preparedness to disasters and overcoming their negative consequences. On the flip side of the coin, with technological advancement we become more vulnerable to new types of threats such as communication system breakdowns, bio-nuclear terrorism, and devastating oil spills that we recently experienced in the Gulf of Mexico. One important point about our coping ability with disasters is that in times of crises and disasters we look to our leaders for vision and direction that will lead to the return of normalcy. It is this crisis management that defines the true devastation of the event (Boin et al. 2005; t'Hart, Rosenthal, and Kouzmin 1993).

Managing Routine Emergencies, Catastrophes, and Extreme Events

Crisis management entails activities that are meant to be focused in progressive stages. Step one involves preventive measures. Step two involves mitigation. Step three entails critical decision making by leadership. Step four is the eventual push towards a return to normalcy and the status quo that was left behind.

In order to be an effective emergency manager, according to McEntire and Dawson (2007), one must become well-acquainted with all departments and agencies that will have a role in disaster's four phases of emergency management. Emergency management involves network of organizations from various fields including public, nonprofit, and private sectors as well as organizations from

different levels of government. Waugh and Streib (2006) underline that success of an emergency manager is tied with the effectiveness of his/her interactions with other government officials and disaster management community. Emergency managers must use networks and relationships to develop uniform goals and strategies. The most important tool needed for a network to work effectively in the disaster response process is communication. It is communication that fosters success in coordinating efforts that are necessary in order to achieve and maintain common goals. McEntire and Dawson (2007) highlight three important components of disaster communication. Firstly, pre-disaster ties are necessary for an effective communication during disaster. Secondly, partnering organizations have to have common or interoperable means of communications. This means that without a common communication infrastructure and technology, emergency management partners cannot communicate successfully. Lastly, organizations should be willing to work together. Otherwise having pre-disaster ties and common communication tools does not enhance coordination.

When the size of emergencies is small, meaning they are mere hazards or incidents, local emergency management officials are completely capable of handling the response. It is when emergencies are moderately-sized that they are classified as disasters because they generally lead to loss of life and property. It is in these circumstances that aid and assistance is not solely within the control of the local level. The most intense classification of an emergency is that of catastrophic or extreme nature. It is in these situations that all levels of government are involved in the response effort. Unlike routine disasters, catastrophic disasters are unpredictable. Communication disruption is more evident in catastrophic disasters because in most circumstances, preparation is in place for routine disasters. The degree of decision making definitely is related to the degree of the disaster. Lastly, the degree in which collaborative efforts are sought after throughout community depends on how catastrophic the disaster is (Kapucu and Van Wart 2006).

When it comes to the outcomes of extreme events and crises, it is imperative to note the leader's ability to lead successfully. If the response to a crisis turns out to be negative, it is inevitably the result of the work of the leader and it is usually the poor quality of the leaders' decision making that is responsible for undesirable consequences. There are four major assumptions that outline how individuals responsible for leading during crises manage these major challenges: (1) It is the quality of the initial decisions or procedures that outlines how successful the final outcome is. (2) Leaders must be capable of successfully making decisions to ensure

quality outcomes. (3) Policymakers only make an effort to provide high quality decision making if in fact the organization finds the issue to be important. (4) Even though leaders may deal with an extremely important issue, one or more constraints may dominate the leader's decision making (Janis 1989).

A catastrophic disaster is large in size and usually results in major disruption in communication and the capacity for decision making. In order to be a successful leader in a catastrophic event, one must be able to assess and adapt to the situation, be able to reinstate communications, be willing to make all kinds of decisions, and promote coordination between government and other other actors' responses to disasters or crises. In the task of managing disasters, there are four specific routine functionalities that must be in place: (1) An established plan and system. (2) Good communication and proper use of information technologies. (3) Prearranged decision-making procedures. (4) Formalized cooperation and effective boundary-spanning agencies. There are several requirements for emergency managers in order to be successful in all stages of disaster management. Emergency managers must be willing to adapt to the circumstances and the situation at hand. Leaders must be willing and able to restore all communication systems, because it is communication that is essential to maintain working response efforts. In addition, leaders must be willing to be flexible in their decision making processes. Lastly, the most effective leadership is symbolic of a high level of coordination amongst different responders in government, nonprofit, and private sectors (Kapucu 2006; Kapucu and Van Wart 2006).

Leadership Competencies in Managing Catastrophes

With the continual improvement of technology, modern governments are much better equipped to handle crisis more effectively than empires or kingdoms in the past. Today, in order to govern through times of crisis, it is imperative that leaders rely on legitimacy and the trust of the people. Failure to do so will cause the system to breakdown. This inevitably will lead to chaos with far-reaching consequences and uncontrollable outcomes. In managing during times of disasters, along with legitimacy and trust, it is important that leaders employ a sense of urgency in their decision-making strategies. In the case of Katrina, all emergency personnel and officials were caught by total surprise. It was this "surprise" that paralyzed response and led to chaos. If there was capacity building for chaos, which includes planning, preparation, and response flexibilities, along with surprise management, the advance preparation would have saved lives and billions of dollars. According to Farazmand

(2007, p. 157), surprise management is based on five principles: It rejects anything that is routine and expected; It is constantly changing, includes “flexibility and adaptability”; It requires certain preconditions to qualify as surprising and chaotic; It demands cutting-edge knowledge, skills, and attitudes beyond the comprehension of most people in routine environments of governance and administration; and, it requires extraordinary and yet disciplined authority and power with unrestrained resources.

Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) identify five qualities of mindfulness in managing the unexpected: “preoccupation with failure, reluctance to simplify interpretations, and sensitivity to operations” (p. 45) to anticipate and become aware of the unexpected and commitment to resilience and deference to expertise to contain the unexpected when it occurs. While it may be true that the great leaders in history are those who turned crisis into prosperity, it should be remembered that many failed in the attempt. In the absence of systematic research into cases of successful crisis-induced reform, we cannot present a set of managerial prescriptions. The following are three lessons from Boin and t’Hart’s (2003) research that may help crisis leaders to avoid reform-induced crisis: 1) Leaders need to formulate a crisis management philosophy, which can help to negotiate the inherent dilemma of reparation and reform; 2) Leaders should not push reform without considering opposite arguments. If they use the crisis to ignore critics, they will mobilize their own opposition at a time when their performance is already under scrutiny; and 3) Crisis-induced reform creates exceptional challenges for the long term.

Leadership Competencies

Wayne Blanchard, coordinator of the FEMA higher education project at Emergency Management Institute/FEMA, has identified core areas where it is necessary that emergency managers be completely competent: “(1) Leadership and team building, (2) networking and coordination, (3) political, bureaucratic, and social context” (Patton 2007, p. 81). During times of crises, it is imperative that emergency managers are not only firm and possess established protocols, but also be creative and willing to improvise. It is the idea of collaboration during emergency situations that provide emergency managers with time, energy, man power, and funding. Lester and Krejci (2007) confirm Blanchard’s discussions and argue that it is vital acting like a team with a shared mission and vision for success. Instead of feuding over jurisdiction, state, federal, and local emergency management officials need to join together as a team and not act like competitors. It is the role of the

transformational leader to connect the larger vision with the needs present in the environment and bring all actors together (Lester and Krejci 2007). Furthermore, need for change within the organizational and interorganizational context require strong leadership. The first key to changing a system is to make sure that the organization is willing to change. The next step for transformation is for an organization to develop a common goal or mission. It is also important to maintain the notion that leadership does not lie alone in a centralized body but rather widespread throughout the entire organization. It is the notion of this transformational leadership pattern that initiates organizational trust and a sense of need to achieve the greater societal good (Lester and Krejci 2007).

There are five key tasks in order to be successful in crisis leadership according to Boin et al. (2005): (1) Sense Making – Leaders have the responsibility to look out for the possibility of crises and handle the preparation process to eliminate any factors that could have been avoided. (2) Decision Making and Coordinating Implementation – Leaders have the responsibility to make final decisions and in doing so make sure that they reach out to the community and gather as many interested crisis responders as possible. (3) Meaning Making – Leaders are in the limelight to direct the public in the right direction. It is their ultimate responsibility to motivate the community to believe that they will get through this situation. (4) Accounting and Ending – The leader must keep the effected parties on track to eventually achieve closure and an opportunity to move on past the crisis. (5) Learning – It is imperative that the leader evaluates the situation and comes up with lessons that can be learned from either the shortfalls or the successes of the entire response efforts. The most important aspect of leading in crisis situation is through communication.

Leadership traits are applicable to crises situations in general but it is obvious that specific crisis conditions will likely to require prioritization of different leadership skills. Thus, Kapucu and Van Wart (2008) consider crisis leadership through overall leadership literature and identify leadership skills that are vital for managing crises and emergencies. They argue that leadership traits required during a catastrophe may vary according to the level of leadership, type of field they operate, conditions in the environment, stakeholders involved in decision making. In order to guide the understanding leadership in crisis situations, Kapucu and Van Wart (2008) provide a framework consisting of certain principles. Firstly, leaders should be skillful in managing networks. Emergency management systems involve substantial amount of interorganizational and intergovernmental networks. Numerous stakeholders in the system have to collaborate with each other for reaching organizational goals as

well as network goals as a whole (Waugh 2003; Patton 2007; Kapucu 2008, Kapucu et al. 2010). From that sense National Response Framework (NRF) of U.S. addresses the necessities of response efforts and offers a remarkable network of primary and supporting agencies that are held responsible for responding to incidents. A leader that has skills and abilities to successfully manage network relationships will likely to have advantage in managing extraordinary situations.

Secondly, Kapucu and Van Wart (2008) underline that leadership during crises and emergencies has political and administrative aspects. Politicians should be able to communicate properly with other elected officials and appointed officials as well as the public (Barton 2001). They need to control the emergency management efforts before, during, and after disasters. Political leaders need to have the ability to effectively command their organizations and ensure the completion of emergency management efforts. Administrative leaders should actually conduct the vital operations for mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery (Kapucu and Van Wart 2008). Out of a long list they highlight a number of leadership characteristics. Table 1 lays out the leadership characteristics that are addressed by Kapucu and Van Wart (2008).

Table 1. Leadership Characteristics for Emergencies and Disasters

- Decisiveness
- Flexibility
- Informing
- Problem solving
- Managing innovation and creativity
- Planning and organizing personnel
- Motivating
- Managing teams and team building
- Scanning the environment
- Strategic planning
- Networking and partnering
- Decision making.

Lack of necessary leadership traits and skills may exacerbate the impact of crises and eventually cause undesirable consequences. According to Lester and Krejci (2007), collaboration that was addressed and designed by National Incident Management System (NIMS) of U.S. largely failed during Hurricane Katrina.

This failure sparks arguments about centralization of emergency management leadership, yet Lester and Krejci (2007) do not see centralization as the best option. They argue that the reason of failure was not because of decentralized leadership per se, but it was because NIMS was not able to foster collaboration in local and state entities in managing emergencies and disasters. In other words, this is a failure of managing interorganizational and intergovernmental networks. Weakness of New Orleans levee system was widely known before Katrina hit the city. Although some improvements were made, the levees were not able to withstand a hurricane stronger than Category 3. Federal funds were not available enough to strengthen the infrastructure up to a desirable point. In addition to these pre-disaster leadership and administrative deficiencies Kapucu and Van (2008) Wart note that there was “an incredible weakness in the chain of command in and around New Orleans in terms of who was authorized to make emergency decisions” (p. 725) during the Katrina disaster. The governor of Louisiana and the mayor of New Orleans declared mandatory evacuation 19 hours prior to hurricane’s landfall, which left thousands of people unable to evacuate the city (GAO 2006). Moreover, there was poor leadership in flexible decision making for shelter arrangements during the hurricane. Superdome was designated for sheltering 20,000, yet the preparations for that many people, sanitations, water stock, air ventilation and so forth were insufficient (Kapucu and Van Wart 2008). Unreasonable decision making was not prominent only at the local level. There was significant reluctance to and lack of coordination. Kapucu and Van Wart (2008) states that “Governor Blanco refused to sign an agreement proposed by the White House to share control of National Guard forces with federal authorities” (p. 733). This reluctance to share authority in case of Governor Blanco may stem from lack of trust among leaders. In fact, federal agencies were suspicious about the coping capacity of local administrations, whilst local governments were not comfortable with federal oversight since it reminds a control of national entities over locals.

Conclusion

Leadership is one of the key aspects of managing emergencies and crises successfully. Leading before, during, and after the crises require different competencies and traits than other types of leadership. Catastrophic disasters and routine emergencies mostly demand different leadership patterns. Leaders need to be able to manage surprises mostly prominent in catastrophes. On the other hand, routine emergencies generally require more standardized actions. Although

leadership requirements may vary based on the type of crisis, environment, type of organization, sector, and scope of the event, it is possible to draw a framework for leadership competencies necessary for disaster and crises management. In general terms, being able to cooperate with other stakeholders, being flexible in decision making and operations, adaptability to disaster conditions, and effective communication with other stakeholders and the public are most important leadership traits.

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