

# Leadership during crises

Strong leadership in a crisis can drastically improve response and recovery, while weak leadership can aggravate a dire situation. This article examines effective and ineffective leaders in disasters, and what we can learn from them

On February 27, 2010, an earthquake struck Chile that was large enough to move the country's capital 11 inches to the west and tilt the Earth's axis by three inches. The earthquake, called F27, destroyed schools, hospitals, roads, homes and businesses, and resulted in losses equal to 18 per cent of Chile's GDP. However, strong leadership enabled the country to recover from the disaster rapidly. Just six weeks after the earthquake, all children had returned to school and, a year after the event, Chile's economy had achieved an impressive annual growth rate of six per cent.

In contrast, ineffective leadership during Hurricane Katrina led to overlooked needs, delayed search and rescue operations, and inadequate responses to people in need of relief and assistance.

Leadership is the cornerstone of disaster relief and recovery. Strategically effective leadership can rebuild a community through the transformational power of a compelling and collaborative vision. But it can also create chaos and fear, impeding growth and development, thus further degrading an already crumbling socioeconomic infrastructure. Good leadership can bring communities together and create lasting solutions; poor leadership can magnify and amplify the problems that the disaster created.

Disasters are costly and their occurrence is on the increase, so strong leaders who can mitigate and respond to these crises in a timely and effective manner are crucial. What separates the mediocre leaders from the excellent ones? How should a great leader focus his or her efforts to maximise their effectiveness? An examination of past crises, the leaders who responded and their socioeconomic results can help to contrast and compare key qualities of effective and ineffective leadership.

A disaster presents a multifaceted situation that will challenge a leader's capacity to identify and prioritise the goals and vision necessary to support the recovery of a community during a crisis. Leaders are not only responsible for making difficult decisions, but are looked upon as a source of inspiration to their teams in a complex and rapidly evolving environment where lives, property and the economy are under threat.

During a disaster, information is often fragmented and inaccurate; mistakes can be fatal. To succeed in such an environment, leaders must possess a specific set of qualities. They need to be able to



react quickly to changing situations during a crisis, even when information is lacking. They need to delegate tasks appropriately, so they can maintain strategic oversight without becoming distracted by tactical details. They need to express the elements of the disaster concisely, while maintaining a strong hold on the larger vision and plan, and be able to communicate this to their team clearly in their efforts to guide them towards achieving the mission's goals.

Leaders must maintain a continuous broad view of the crisis, orchestrating key interventions to facilitate progressive growth to achieve their long-term goal. It is easy for officials to be pulled into immediate and demanding tactical matters, as such tasks are important and clear and have a sense of urgency. However, officials must resist these urges and delegate to other members of the team. Becoming embroiled in smaller tasks skews and distracts a leader from the ultimate vision and goal.

The temptation to work 'hands-on' can be strong, as many senior police officials found after the Boston marathon bombing in the US. One senior police official who was present when the bombing

occurred, literally had to be pulled away from responding to an individual victim in order to establish a joint strategic command. Ultimately, senior officials in Boston were able to focus on strategic matters thanks to the creation of a central command location and the determination of the Massachusetts Governor, Deval Patrick, who was the head of the response's command group. The creation of the central command away from the epicentre of the crisis, allowed Boston's senior officials to focus on broader and longer term response goals and to integrate key partner agencies properly without being pulled into immediate individual victim rescues.

## Accountability and diligence

In contrast, Japan's Prime Minister Naoto Kan became overly focused on tactical matters after the 2011 Fukushima disaster, resulting in poor decision-making that influenced the entire operation.

Prime Minister Kan refused to delegate decision-making to subordinates, which impeded already poor communications, immersing himself instead in the tactical details surrounding the

*An IAEA fact-finding team at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in 2011. Many members of the public lost faith in the government, owing to inconsistent and haphazard public information, symptomatic of leadership failure*

IAEA Imagebank | Greg Webb | IAEA

nuclear plant. Rather than remaining at the incident command centre, he visited the Fukushima Daiichi site and, in doing so, disrupted the chain of command, which added confusion to an already critical scenario. Had the prime minister acted in accordance with his duties as a leader, perhaps the situation might have been contained sooner.

Leaders need to delegate tasks appropriately and clearly in order to stay focused on strategy. Hurricane Katrina and Chile's F27 earthquake are two contrasting examples of effective and ineffective task delegation. The successful implementation of long-term strategy after the Chile earthquake was largely owing to the accountability and diligence of taskforce members. When creating a response and recovery plan, specific cabinet members were assigned precise responsibilities by the elected president, Sebastián Piñera, who clearly specified the outlines and goals for each member. This accountability was then reflected throughout the chain of command, and allowed Chile to make its swift recovery.

In contrast, during Hurricane Katrina, great confusion prevailed in regard to organisational roles and responsibilities. ►

► Typical response systems that officials depended upon failed. A hypothetical exercise known as 'Hurricane Pam' had led to draft emergency plans in early 2005, yet these were incomplete when Hurricane Katrina made landfall in August of that year. Some of the plans' concepts had been enacted with relative success, but many of the lessons identified in the exercise were ignored and poorly applied.

The public had been forewarned about the impending storm and yet, despite warnings, the government neglected to prepare fully for Hurricane Katrina's fallout. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was slow to respond; on the day Katrina struck, officials were still trying to obtain information about the extent of damage rather than reacting and mobilising key resources immediately, despite only having partial information.

Key leaders did not grasp the magnitude of the catastrophe. The actions, communication and decisions made by officials before and after Hurricane Katrina hit were meagre at best – slow, unprepared and uncoordinated. These miscommunications considerably hindered response times, causing more problems for the already disaster-ridden area.

The Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development had accepted responsibility for developing a plan of action for transportation and evacuation in emergencies. However, nothing had been prepared prior to the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) inability to co-ordinate responsibilities delayed search and rescue operations which, ultimately, led to higher death counts. FEMA's relationships with state and local officials had broken down over many years prior to Katrina because preparedness grant programmes were transferred to another section within DHS, and this reduced FEMA's effectiveness during Hurricane Katrina. FEMA's Director, Michael Brown lacked the insight to prepare adequately for Hurricane Katrina's landfall; he failed to preposition critical personnel and equipment.

Federal law enforcement was another area that experienced disorganised and slowly mobilised resources. Lack of preparation before the hurricane meant that identification of which department would take the lead on federal law enforcement – either the DHS or the Department of Justice – had not taken place. This indecisive identification between departments led to unnecessary turf wars, which distracted from the ultimate recovery and relief efforts needed to restore the community. The disorganisation within the local, state and federal organisations resulted in many victims of the disaster being left without food, water and other critical supplies.

Many lessons about ineffective leadership can be identified from the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe, including the need for pre-preparedness, clear designation of organisational roles and responsibilities, concise and transparent communication and strategic oversight with the ability to co-ordinate and mobilise necessary resources.

During and following disasters, public confusion and uncertainty can be overwhelming, even without leadership discrepancies. Leaders must combat this confusion and uncertainty by establishing clear communication techniques to ensure the public is informed on what is happening, and how the situation is being handled. When communication with the public is not carefully managed, the public may question the leadership team's competence. Without frequent and accurate communication from officials, the public may take speculation and misinformation by news sources as fact, which may hinder the implementation of response and recovery plans.



*New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Key leaders did not grasp the magnitude of the catastrophe; the actions, communication and decisions made by officials before and after the storm hit were meagre at best*

USCG Photo | Gary Johnson, USCGAUX

*Through the activation of the Orsan Plan after the Paris attacks in November 2015, the medical community surged into action and was able to attend to the wounded quickly and efficiently (see report by RAID in CRJ 11:3)*

RAID



*F27 earthquake and tsunami in Chile, 2010: President Piñera had a clear vision for the country's recovery, which involved bouncing forward to better economic growth than before the earthquake took place. This vision was well communicated and enhanced public support for the government*

Peter Burgess | EU ECHO

After the F27 earthquake in Chile, President Piñera was able to communicate effectively with communities, colleagues and the general public. Piñera and his team recognised the importance of communication and shared status information not only about local areas, but also the entire country. He informed the public of the likelihood of new dangers in the immediate future, and how citizens would receive emergency aid.

Piñera ensured that he was clear about his vision for the country's recovery. He shared his plans to ensure Chile not only recovered from the earthquake, but to make it achieve economic growth beyond its previous state before the earthquake took place. The public reacted positively to Piñera's ambitious and well-communicated vision which, in turn, expedited recovery efforts and enhanced public support of the government.

Similarly, New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was able to communicate effectively with the public after the 9/11 disaster in 2001. Giuliani spoke frequently to the press – sometimes several times a day – sharing updates on the recovery effort and emerging details about the crisis. His willingness to be available and his candidness reassured the public that the situation was being properly managed and increased public confidence in the immediate response efforts.

Effective communication extends beyond merely speaking to the public frequently. After Japan's Fukushima disaster, Prime Minister Kan broadcast instructions about evacuations several times to the public. However, Kan's communication had the opposite effect of Giuliani's: he was inconsistent and haphazard with his actions and reports, thus making the public feel misinformed and confused. Prime Minister Kan had attempted to relay evacuation radii to the public, but because of changing expert estimates on the safest course of action, different radii were given at different times. Nor did officials provide the public with the reasons behind the changing evacuation zones, causing distrust in the government.

Kenichi Shimomura, who was in charge of communication with the public, remarked that the message would have been more successful if other members of the government had shared information about the decision process and the various options that were being considered. Had this occurred, it would have shown the government's willingness to be transparent about its operations and would have explained any future changes in evacuation instructions without undermining Prime Minister Kan's authority.

Leadership is essential in all facets of life. Effective leadership can help a country or city recover from a crisis. Strong leadership can help an organisation become successful. Mindful leadership enables parents to support the growth of children to become strong, healthy and productive adults.

There are many qualities essential to effective leadership as discussed above, including: Clear communication; task delegation; commitment to the mission and the welfare of the people; team motivation; collaborative co-ordination with multiple organisations; assuming risk of loss and failure; and maintaining strategic vision about the ultimate mission at hand. For example, leaders of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) must co-ordinate with other organisations and the government in order to maximise their effectiveness. Although NGOs were highly active after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in China, poor co-ordination with the government resulted in reduced effectiveness from all organisations that attempted to help.

Another example of leadership can be seen in the emergency

medicine environment. In a medical situation where a patient's life is at risk, a leader must effectively and efficiently communicate goals and all the information required to improve patient care, minimise misunderstandings and maximise positive outcomes.

In the event of a crisis, regular communication between a healthcare facility and the first responders on the scene ensures that both the emergency department and the first responding organisations are working in tandem with one another, and with a shared end goal. Failure to communicate effectively can result in inefficiencies that prevent victims of a disaster from getting the resources and medical attention they need. By improving both inter- and intra-organisational co-ordination of responsibilities, organisations responding to disasters can improve outcomes and save lives.

The effectiveness of communication between hospitals and first

## Becoming embroiled in smaller tasks skews and distracts a leader from the ultimate vision and goal

responders was seen in response to the Paris attacks on November 13, 2015. Paris's protocol for citywide emergencies, termed the Orsan Plan, was established 20 years ago, but November was the first time the plan was actually employed. Orsan is an acronym for a French term, which translates as: "Organisation of the response by the healthcare system to an exceptional medical situation."

The protocol involves establishing disaster medical facilities on site, as well as preparing hospitals for a sudden influx of patients, which includes freeing hospital beds and ensuring a sufficient amount of staff is on site. The protocol calls for the appointment of a medical response director and deputies, who are responsible for co-ordinating operations and directing emergency personnel (see CRJ 11:3).

The attacks, which left 129 dead and over 300 wounded, were some of the worst Paris had seen since World War II. However, through the activation of the Orsan Plan, the medical community surged into action and was able to attend to the wounded quickly.

Paris had a plan in place, ready to be mobilised at any moment; the disaster was handled efficiently and prevented further damage to the people of the city.

In the challenging post-disaster environment, strong leaders are crucial to ensuring the best outcomes in response and recovery. By focusing on strategy and effective communication, leaders can minimise confusion and create lasting solutions after disasters occur. Disasters, both natural and manmade, are one of the few things that have the potential to uproot entire communities.

It is increasingly important that a community can look to leaders and people in power for hope and inspiration in times of crisis, but for that to happen the leader must be trustworthy and conscious of his or her duties, and must understand what it means to be a leader.

A community can overcome any disaster if its leaders can communicate effectively with their colleagues and the public, delegate responsibilities, and can maintain a strategic outlook. 

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