

SpillCon (02 - 05 May)

Tuesday 03 May

Session: Planning and Managing Complex

Emergencies

Beyond Command and Control --

How Leaders Prepare for Response

Please may I say how grateful I am to have the opportunity to speak today.

I preface my remarks by the usual caveats: These are my ideas. What I say should not be construed as the opinion of the Navy or the Australian Government.

The primary purpose of this talk is to advance an understanding of leadership beyond the inherited myths and traditions of command and control.

I presume two things:

First: command and control is directive and concerned with the power of one over others.

Second: Leadership is collaborative and concerned to evolve power *with* others.

I argue: the real power in leadership is not the power of one over others, but the power of the collective; **the power leaders build with others in a joint effort.**

Leaders do best when they build collaborations and foster the sort of mutual institutional culture that lets people do well.

The contribution of this talk

Typically, when we look to leadership in emergencies, disasters or incidents, we look to leadership *in the moment*. We look to see someone "in charge," taking responsibility for coordination and decision.

But the truly significant influence of leadership precedes the critical incident by years.

Leadership establishes *the* foundational elements of organisational or institutional culture.

Culture defines background conditions, which are critical, since immersed in an institutional culture people learn to do well or poorly. People exist in contexts. People cannot be wholly or properly understood in isolation.

Asserting the power and influence of the organisational context, this talk suggests that to understand people, and the way people respond in moments of crisis, we must understand the way people are led in moments of calm.

In emergency, it is important that people are accustomed to thinking for themselves, to acting with initiative, to getting along with others, admitting mistakes and correcting them.

In emergency it is not constructive when people are acculturated to stifling bureaucratic compliance. It is not helpful when people wait to be told what to do, when they have a check box mentality, when they are afraid of consequences, when they cannot make a decision to save themselves.

The Understanding of Leadership I Oppose

The idea I challenge is the idea that leaders are, in some way, far apart from the rest of us.

The idea of leadership I challenge is the misbelief leadership is commanding, controlling, or dominating.

That some people are better than the rest of us. That some people know it all, that they never make a mistake, that we have to wait for these superior beings to tell us what to do.

This misreading of leadership has a very wide currency and resonance.

It is cashed out in two main ways:

One: in an oversupply of rules and bureaucratic procedures. These are directions - imposed from above - which very often serve the purpose of "butt protection". In the enquiry following disaster, the first question is: were any rules broken? The violator is blamed, but the institutional hierarchy gets off the hook: "we had a rule to stop that". ([Andrew Hopkins, *Safety, Culture and Risk*, CCH: Sydney, 2005, p. 37](#))

Two: in the habits of hectoring which pervade public life. For example: the author, economist and critic, George Megalogenis, describes political culture -- and I quote him -- which favours the attention-seeker over the expert and the bully over the consensus builder. ([Quarterly Essay 61, page. 11](#))

In the safety critical domain -- where people deal with each other, complex regulation, often with high technology and typically with significant time pressure -- leadership is not useful when it seeks to overpower or completely control.

When regulation, or direction or firmness is required, leaders should exert only so much authority to ensure tasks are safely and professionally carried out. Positive control should never be excessive, and always respectful.

Leadership's best effect is in the engagement of people.

Collaborative Culture

Looking beyond command and control, this talk asks leaders to be mindful of their larger responsibility to build a communicative, collaborative culture.

People in a safety-critical context might have a clear goal; the right mix of experience and skills, adequate resources and yet still suffer a devastating breakdown in coordination due to miscommunication, interpersonal conflict or poor judgments in the heat of the moment.

But the hot moment is only a particular instant and a single place. Leadership, which leads to failure in the critical time, is large, complex and pervasive.

Leadership defines institutions, and the risk and safety systems, which extend beyond single institutions and agencies.

This is important because we face emergencies with the institutions we have, not the organisations or cultures we would like -- or which we need.

Leaders need to make it possible for people -- including people from different organisations -- to work together in the face of ambiguous sometimes-conflicting information, under conditions of duress, with equipment and resources that might be inadequate and in environments that might be dangerous.

Successful leaders will foster the sort of culture within which people at the coalface feel free to exercise initiative and common sense.

To underline this point:

When people speak of intelligence failures, which preceded terrorist atrocities, the failure of leaders to build effective collaborations and to enable the initiative of people on the ground is a large part of the miscarriage which is described. ([David Graham, "How Belgium Tried and Failed to Stop Jihadist Attacks," *The Atlantic*, March 22, 2016](#))

Constructive leadership is about the power leaders evolve *with* others.

Power With

Coined by Mary Follett in her important book, *Creative Experience*, the idea of "power with" foreshadowed the concept of soft power advanced by Joseph Nye of Harvard University.

The depictive phrasing: "power with," speaks against the ideas of supreme authority which are contained in the established discourse.

The traditional discourse -- informed by assumptions of "power over" -- contains an implied polarity; a sense *one* is powerful, and the *other* powerless.

The contrasting ideas of "power with" are *not* ideas of equality.

"Power with" *is* about connection and combination.

Unlike "power over," the basic ideas of "power with" gesture to collaboration from which all parties benefit.

Where "power over" is a notion defined by the inevitability juniors will obey or face the consequences, the idea of "power with" is different.

"Power with" is informed by the sense of possibility and responsiveness. In the "power with" idea, there is the human sense of unity and engagement.

The practical effect is this: in situations of unforeseen or atypical problem solving -- like emergencies -- the "power with" approach enables the organic, and innovative responsiveness of the group.

In situations where there is a standard operating procedure, and where specialised roles are allocated among a group, the "power with" perspective enables effective *partnership, communication* and *risk mitigation*. Lessons are learned "without fear or favour".

How so?

Imagine the senior surgeon, or the senior pilot, the senior officer or the incident controller about to make some mistake, but prevented by the junior who speaks up. And imagine the wash up debrief, where seniority is not a factor, so as lessons might be learned without prejudice.

This scenario describes "power with," a leadership system where rank has no part but performance and responsibility do.

The idea of a leadership "system" is significant.

The idea is illustrated by reference to the human body: what would you rather have, the head or the heart? Of course, the question is nonsense, since we cannot have one or the other. We must have each together; this is because the body is a system -- it only works when it is interconnected. Each part has a specific function, and each part depends on the other elements.

So it is in the case of "power with" leadership.

The organisation or the team or the small squad, or the inter-agency task group is a system: leading and following is a partnership.

The point is: while positional seniority is important, so is the inter-action and the connection of each part.

From the "power with" perspective, the cooperation of each element in a group generates a critical self-sustaining human energy or power.

In contrast, from the traditional "power over" perspective, the power in a group is a mono-dimensional directive power, which must either grow larger itself, or diminish the power of junior people in order to sustain the relative power proportion or balance.

This means, in a "power over" model, junior people can never properly flourish, because the risk of a junior over-shadowing the "senior" is just impossible.

The co-active "power with" relationship requires *integration* -- resonant with the general culture of democratic society -- and *transparency*, consistent with routine expectations of accountability.

On the view of this talk, the directive, emphatic and assertive habits of "command and control" can have unfortunate effects **when they outrun ideas of integration.**

This means, ideas of control should be tempered by ideas of integration.

The term "integration" speaks to ideas of trustworthiness and relationship. The idea

acknowledges the importance of constructive exchange between people.

Integration points to leadership concerned with *evolving* power and building "power with" other people.

In a Nutshell

General and President, Dwight Eisenhower, put this in a nutshell.

General Eisenhower said: "leadership is an ability 'to get people to work together, not only because you **tell** them to do so and [because you] **enforce** your orders, but because they instinctively want to do it for you... You don't lead by hitting people over the head; that's assault not leadership'".

Eisenhower's remarks coincide with my theme: On occasion leaders **do** need to use hard or directive power.

But they should be very careful.

Hard power is very easily overplayed, and when overstated it has a destructive effect: building barriers, and resentments and wrecking the

ability of leaders to nourish partnerships and combination.

I do not argue against power.

But I ask for a *new orientation* toward power, for a *reimagining* of power, for a *subtler and more nuanced reading* of power.

The TADMUS Example

I offer, as an example, the TADMUS project.

TADMUS - Tactical Decision Making Under Stress.

Sponsored by the United States Office of Naval Research, the TADMUS project aimed to develop an understanding of critical thinking in stressful teamwork contexts, so as people might be trained to better deal with these situations.

TADMUS was initiated after the July 3 1988 tragedy involving the USS *Vincennes*.

Vincennes, a Ticonderoga cruiser, shot down Iranian Air Flight 655 over the Persian Gulf, killing 290 civilians.

In this event: stress, task fixation and the unconscious distortion of data all played their part.

But the unconstructive effect of overbearing leadership and a directive culture also had a role to play.

The TADMUS research programme shows that:

The leaders who do best:

1. Recognise relatively mechanical, quantitative and foreseeable tasks, for what they are.
2. See the difference between tasks, which require mechanical compliance, and tasks that require qualitative mastery.

The tasks of qualitative mastery are those, which require skilled and autonomous individuals to combine as an effective team. They are the tasks which mark the difference between success and failure when people make decisions under stress.

3. Interrogate evidence-conclusion relationships within an evolving situation: In other words, they monitor the validity of conclusions even

as events unfold. This means the best leaders judge: does the conclusion continue to hold, or is it no longer sound based on evidence of the unfolding event.

4. Identify incompleteness, unreliability, or conflict in the evidence, even as the evidence unfolds.

And

5. The best leaders correct. Correcting requires admitting mistake. For someone acculturated to the I'm-the-boss-I'm-always-right model -- this is a tough ask.

How do leaders do this?

1. They build an organisational culture which recognises the value of teamwork skills

And which

2. Trains people to develop shared situation awareness about an evolving event.

Karl Weick offers us a way of summarising this.

Weick coined the term "sensemaking".

Sensemaking

Weick established that when people focus on commanding, controlling and decision-making, then the decisions they make and the commands and directions they give, come to be attached to ego.

When a decision is attached to ego, there is the unhelpful tendency to become defensive.

This means that in response to questions, complexity and uncertainty people come to be self-justifying and protective.

This is significant because in situations of complexity and urgency, defensive people are less likely to make a course correction.

This is for the reason that the defensive people are more likely to see correction, adjustment or a change in direction as weakness or incompetence.

You see this all the time in politics, where change -- no matter how sensible -- is criticised as a "back-flip" or as something other than an intelligent amendment to policy.

Weick suggests it is more constructive to reframe the process of decision-making.

Weick would accept that one person is in charge and that one person would bear a formal responsibility.

But he would encourage us to think of decisions emerging from a collective process of sense-making.

For a leader, when engaging in sense-making it is easier to involve other people, easier to update information, to reinterpret, easier to test the plausibility of evidence, easier to test the meaning we are making of an evolving situation -- **before** a decision is made.

And easier to re-evaluate decisions once they are made.

Sensemaking is an act of discovery, it is a collaborative and shared evolution -- there is nothing about sensemaking which suggests leaders have to defend a decision or a determination.

Sensemaking allows for correction, and it suits complex and rapidly unfolding situations.

Significantly, it is the rapidly unfolding and complex situation which has traditionally been home to command and control direction.

But: when situations are complex and unfolding rapidly, the traditional command and control approach is unlikely to be as constructive as we assume.

In rapidly unfolding and complex situations, what matters is flexible and adaptive coordination among team members.

This sort of performance requires collaborative leadership -- not directive command and control.

Conclusion

In a nutshell: leaders prepare for response when they foster a culture of sense-making, when they foster the capacity to be flexible, to be responsive and to be cooperative.

How:

Firstly through orders, instructions, standard procedures and regulations which are responsive to the operator. In other words, the regulate-ED has a part to play in forming the regulat-ION.

Secondly through the metaphor of practice. In other words, what you do as a leader is evidence of your commitment to what you say.

You have to build a just culture, an environment where questions come to be appreciated as the antidote to uncertainty, and where changing your mind or making a correction is not evidence of indecisiveness.

Leaders recognise errors as human mistakes, not as wicked violations, and they foster an environment where people "fess up" and recognise covering up as wrong and risky.

You prepare for emergency by leading, not by directing or dominating.

This is significant because we face emergencies with the institutions and the institutional cultures we have, not the organisations we would like -- or which we need.

If we have acculturated our people to bureaucratic subservience and unthinking compliance then we have deprived them of their tactical independence and we have failed.