Coast Guard petty officer looks for survivors in wake of Hurricane Katrina

Adaptive Leadership in Times of Crisis

BY CHIEMI HAYASHI AND AMEY SOO

Nothing throws leadership into starker relief than a crisis, as Hurricane Katrina and the Great East Japan earthquake both demonstrated. Now more than ever, the ripple effects from a crisis spread far beyond its epicenter, often in unexpected ways. At the same time, faith in authority has eroded: trust in the U.S. Federal Government's ability to handle domestic problems, for example, has been declining for the past decade.[1] Add the challenge of managing digital media and its rapid information cycle, and leaders have but minutes to disseminate mitigation strategies. However, by examining the response to past catastrophes, lessons can be gleaned on how leadership must be transformed to raise collective resilience to today's complex and interconnected risks.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina was a disaster of epic proportions, killing 1,833 people and affecting 500,000 livelihoods[2] and, according to census data, causing a 29-percent dip in the population of New Orleans.[3] In March 2011, the Great East Japan earthquake took the lives of nearly 20,000 people and ruined the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands. But in addition to the devastating human loss of such tragedies, unanticipated repercussions were felt around the globe. Leaders in London were surprised when the hurricane in the United States caused gas prices to spike in the United Kingdom, and few imagined that a disaster in Japan would shut down a car manufacturing plant in Detroit or trigger dramatic changes in nuclear energy policy in Europe.

In a national context, the two incidents were adaptive challenges. Ronald Heifetz, the founder of Harvard's Center for Public Leadership, makes the distinction between "technical" and "adaptive" challenges. The former pertains to problems where solutions are already known. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are those for which new solutions must be invented. In an international context, the two incidents were textbook examples of the impact of exogenous shock that spread quickly in an interdependent and hyperconnected world. The two dimensions

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highlight the need for *adaptive leadership*, which Heifetz[4] defines as specifically about change that enables the capacity to thrive in crisis environments.

The World Economic Forum's 2012 *Global Risks Report*[5] featured a special report on the Japan earthquake. The 9.0 magnitude earthquake and the resulting tsunami led to the meltdown of three nuclear reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. In the leadership sphere, the report identified insights including the need for adaptability, the importance of advancing swiftly into the information space, and the necessity of the skills of leadership and "followership," which entails avoiding either excessive conformity or excessive conflict. Similar points were later made in the findings of the independent Kurokawa Commission charged by the Japanese parliament to investigate how a natural disaster evolved into a nuclear power crisis.[6]

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This article builds from the *Global Risks Report* analysis to explore three main characteristics of leadership: the ability to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, to make efficient use of communication tools, and to embrace flexible forms of collaboration. All three are pertinent to the security sector, given the key role of communication and cooperation in the wake of major crises.

Adaptive Leadership

The need for good adaptive leadership in a crisis is widely acknowledged, but it is also needed to address the increasing toughness of global challenges. In their 2012 article "Advances in Global Leadership,"[7] Dave Ulrich and Norm Smallwood clearly distinguish between leaders and leadership and argue the need for sustainable leadership, a concept that is closely connected to adaptability, since an excessively rigid leadership style cannot be sustained when circumstances change. A leader is defined by the ability to focus knowledge, skills, and values, demonstrating how he or she can become more proficient in his or her ability to lead others.[8] On the other hand, leadership transcends the individual and refers to an ability to shape the environment and leave behind a pattern for success. Leadership is a combination of the right knowledge, the right person or people, the right behavior, and also the right actions. Therefore, great leadership capability endures over time and can evolve to ensure that it adapts to the changing environment. Leaders do matter but, over time, leadership matters more.[9] With the unexpected nature of global risks and their complexity, it is more and more important that leadership models are adaptable, flexible, and, therefore, resilient to potential shocks created by internal and external risks.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina caused immense destruction and the flooding of the historic city of New Orleans, killing thousands of people and ruining livelihoods. It resulted in people questioning leadership—or lack thereof—exhibited by officials before, during, and after the storm. Almost 6 years later, another deadly catastrophe occurred, but across the ocean in Japan. In the aftermath, leadership exhibited by officials was also questioned, but, surprisingly, during the disaster the model for potential great leadership was also discovered: It was exemplified by a company called Lawson, Japan's second most profitable convenience store chain, and

how it coped better than most. Within 4 days, Lawson's production lines and logistics hub had recovered sufficiently to resume about 80 percent of its business. The company was able to reorganize itself and deliver its core function.[10] This ability was attributed to the networked managerial structure that has been refined and fine-tuned over the years as Lawson experienced catastrophes and disasters. As the nature of crises can never be fully anticipated, a network of employees that has access to real-time coordinating methods and the authority to make decisions was more valuable than teams of highly trained risk managers. Adaptive leadership, therefore, does not only appoint one leader, but also distributes the capacity for leadership to all levels and hands these individuals the authority to make decisions in a crisis. This allows people and groups to operate with minimal central authority and deal with a crisis quickly and effectively, potentially lowering the impact of disasters and risks.

These lessons may pose a challenge for civil servants, who often have entrenched hierarchies and ways of working. Nevertheless, that does not make them less important. As demonstrated by Lawson, organizations fare better in a sustained crisis if they have a distributed leadership, a dispersed workforce, less interdependency among parts of the organization, cross-trained generalists rather than specialists, and if they are guided by simple yet flexible rules.[11]

A recent government report provided harsh insights into the Japan disaster and the gaps in leadership. It concluded that "Although triggered by cataclysmic events, the subsequent accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant cannot be regarded as a natural disaster."[12] The report stated that

Fukushima was a man-made disaster that could, and should, have been foreseen and prevented. Several factors were to blame including the failure of regulatory systems and a reluctance to question authority. The operator of the nuclear power plant, Tokyo Electric Power Company management, had a mindset of "obedience to authority" that meant it failed to question regulators and put in place mitigation measures. Although responsibility is dispersed to different levels, authority rarely is—this is experienced to varying degrees in different countries. In contrast to this approach, the convenience store that placed substantial trust in its employees showed how empowering individuals to make the right decisions at the right time can help to build resilience, even in seemingly helpless and hopeless situations.

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Incremental improvements in leadership are no longer enough. Cities and populations are exploding, with ever more livelihoods hinging on the capacity of urban centers to continue their core functions. As a result, each disaster is potentially more devastating in its impact. Although there has been a slow evolution of leadership, what is required now is a transformative leap to meet the increasing pace of risks, interdependencies of systems, and the resulting complexities of this world. After each crisis it must be the goal of authorities to learn from the lessons that emerged and ensure there is an improvement in preparedness for the next crisis, whether it is natural, man-made, or a combination of both.

Changing Roles of Communications and Social Networks

The information space is a critical leadership tool for communication that is not currently fully or properly utilized. During both disasters, the importance of communication networks and technologies was evident. Hurricane Katrina whipped up a storm over vast communication gaps, with an official inquiry reaching the damning conclusion that "Soon after Katrina made landfall (on 25 August), State and local authorities understood the devastation was serious but, due to the destruction of infrastructure and response capabilities, lacked the ability to communicate with each other and coordinate a response."[13] The challenges were extreme. Katrina debilitated 911 emergency call centers, toppled more than 50,000 utility poles, and caused more than 3 million customers to lose telephone services.[14] This hampered the ability of rescuers to reach victims, stopped much-needed supplies from being delivered, and led to unnecessary suffering and loss of life.

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Despite the efforts of the military, it was only a week later that mobile communications systems began to provide much needed telephone and two-way radio communication in the area. Meanwhile, many communications assets were not used because of a lack of high-level coordination. For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service's radio cache—the largest civilian

supply of radios in the United States—was not fully taken advantage of, despite its contribution to the relief effort.[15] Better interoperability between the systems used by different agencies and more open information sharing could have eliminated the duplicate efforts and communication black holes that thwarted the recovery operation.

Leaders need to go a step further than just recognizing the importance of communication networks: they also need to address the demands and opportunities of the digital age. A decade ago, the media expected authorities to issue guidance on an unfolding crisis within 24 hours; now the window for dominating the information space has shrunk to a matter of minutes. During the nuclear crisis that followed the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, rumors filled the gap left by silence. With social media tools such as Twitter and the ubiquity of smart phones, information— and misinformation—can now propagate at breakneck speed. The speculations that spread rapidly because of a reluctance to use modern media methods allowed these rumors to appear as facts.

This information gap also made it more difficult for subsequent official explanations to displace rumors in the public consciousness. Trust in the integrity of leaders is no longer best maintained by remaining silent until all the facts are collated. Instead, the better course of action is to clarify quickly and honestly what is known and what is not. *Neither age nor rank should be used as an excuse for not understanding the new reality of digital media, which offers essential tools that anyone aspiring to lead in the 21st century must master.*

Learning from its past mistakes, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) switched in 2008 to social media and

Web tools "to provide timely and accurate information related to disaster preparedness response and recovery; provide the public with another avenue for insight into the agency's operations; and engage in what has already become a critical medium in today's world of communications."[16]

Despite this intention, the agency did not immediately capitalize on the available tools during the aftermath of a devastating tornado that struck Joplin, Missouri, in May 2011. It was a local mother and daughter who led the way by setting up a Facebook page about the disaster, which gained 49,000 "likes" within 48 hours and, conversely, helped to inform FEMA of what was going on. When the Weather Channel began broadcasting images of the devastation posted on Facebook and Twitter, FEMA took note. "That was the first really good information that I was able to see that really started to quantify how bad this was, well before any official reports or requests for assistance came through," said FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate in a followup interview.[17] The agency has now begun to monitor hashtags[18] on Twitter to help it track how storms are developing.

Information technologies and networks, just like risks, transcend boundaries and can facilitate collaborative responses to risks. New media are also largely democratic, allowing the public to engage in conversations directly with decisionmakers as well as sharing on-the-ground information and expertise. Leaders have an armory of new media tools at their disposal and need to determine which platform is best suited to communicate in a particular crisis to bridge the physical distance to

DOD (Shane A. Cuomo)

U.S. Airmen, members of Japan Ground Self-Defense Force, and various Japanese civilian agencies load water hoses at Yokota Air Base to be used at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, March 2011

society. The challenge remains how to convey the right message, sometimes in less than 140 characters, but there is no denying this is an important avenue to rebuilding trust.

Effective Collaboration

Communication in itself is of limited value unless it leads to meaningful collaboration. Lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina showed that the processes for unified management, regional planning, and coordination were found severely lacking. The Federal Government did not, according to a White House report, "address the conditions of a catastrophic event with large-scale competing needs, insufficient resources and the absent functioning local governments."[19] The report concluded that "effective incident management of catastrophic events requires coordination of a wide range of organizations and activities, both public and private." This message appears to resonate with Jane Harman, the director, president, and chief executive officer of the Woodrow Wilson International Center

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for Scholars. Speaking at a World Economic Forum discussion on risk in Bangkok in 2012, Harman argued that there was a need to "lash up the private and public sectors, and use the ingenuity and the inventions of the private sectors effectively across the globe."[20]

One example of public-private collaboration that seeks to build risk resilience is the King County Healthcare Coalition in Washington state, which received the Outstanding Partnership Award at the 2012 National Homeland Security Conference in Columbus, Ohio. This alliance includes hospitals, healthcare providers, and representatives from critical infrastructure, public health, law enforcement, and the private sector, with the aim of creating relationships before an emergency strikes to allow for a more effective response.[21]

The use of joint task forces is another example of an important—if challenging—channel for collaboration. In Japan, Joint Task Force Tohoku brought together ground, air, and maritime units from across the armed forces, proving effective in its emergency response. During Hurricane Katrina, Joint Task Force Katrina was created, which coordinated about 14,232 Active-duty personnel. As a joint task force comprised of Active-duty personnel, it was a good example of communication and coordination. However, the same cannot be said for the cohesion between this task force and the National Guard forces. Here, a fragmented deployment system, lack of an integrated command structure, and equipment interoperability exacerbated the existing challenges.[22]

All stakeholders, from government departments to private businesses and academics, need to be involved in dealing with crises to ensure the strengths and capabilities of all the respective parties are used effectively. A collaborative, cooperative relationship will foster innovation and help to restore trust by tapping into the abilities of different sections of society. Trusted networks of experts provide a valuable resource for bolstering confidence in leadership. For example, in the United Kingdom, the government's chief scientific advisor provided

crucial advice to the government during the 2009 swine influenza outbreak and the 2010 volcanic ash incident, while also encouraging all big government departments to recruit scientific advisors. Leadership has become more dispersed, taking advantage of the relationships and collaborations that exist outside traditional hierarchies.

America's commitment to the security of its people, allies, and partners means that it has to face multiple threats and risks. These range from international terrorism and the spread of deadly technologies to economic upheaval and a changing climate. The dependency, interdependency, and co-dependency of threats and risks, however, increase the complexity of the environment in which they exist. Hence, interdependence means not only that our fates are intertwined, but also that through such relationships, some autonomy is lost. The disasters in Japan and the United States took place in a world of great interdependence—a world in which individual prosperity is inextricably linked to global prosperity, security can be directly challenged by developments across an ocean, and actions are open to unprecedented scrutiny.[23] New forms of leadership are emerging to deal with these trends, leadership that empowers individuals to make decisions so society is better able to bounce back from a crisis.

As the examples gleaned from the tragedies of Katrina and the Japanese earthquake show, leadership must be capable of adapting to the unexpected, of tapping into the power of new media, and collaborating in an agile way across sections of society. By better leveraging the brains, power, and resources available in public and private sectors, innovation can be fostered and resilience to threats built up.[24]

Learning from the past, the new narrative for leadership should look forward and leverage opportunities to forge cooperative approaches among nations. Each event that is experienced is an opportunity to challenge organizations to reexamine well-worn practices and beliefs and spark organizational action. It can highlight weaknesses as well as knowledge and skill deficits, while also pointing out the need for innovation and change. "And although this path will have new challenges, facing such adaptive challenges is what leadership is all about, and indeed it will be one of the greatest opportunities of this century," concluded Laura Quinn and Ellen Van Velsor.[25] Leaders do matter, but leadership matters more as great leadership capability endures over time and can evolve to ensure that it is adapted to the environment. Lessons learned from crises need to be constantly revisited so they remain relevant in a fast-evolving world. PRISM

Notes

[1] "Trust in Government," *Gallup.com*, 2012, available at <www.gallup.com/poll/5392/trust-government.aspx>.

[2] *World Disasters Report 2010: Focus on Urban Risk* (Geneva: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2010).

[3] Campbell Robertson, "Smaller New Orleans After Katrina, Census Shows," *The New York Times*, February 3, 2012, available at <www.nytimes.com/2011/02/04/us/04census.html?pagewanted=all>.

[4] Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2009).

[5] *Global Risks 2012* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, January 2012).

[6] *Official Report of the Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission*, The National Diet of Japan, July 2012.

[7] Dave Ulrich and Norm Smallwood, "What Is Leadership? in *Advances in Global Leadership, Volume 7*, ed. William H. Mobley et al., 9–36 (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2012).

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] *Global Risks 2011* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, January 2011). This report defines *resilience* as the ability of a system to reorganize under change and deliver its core function continually, despite the impact of external or internally generated risks.

[11] *Global Risks 2012.*

[12] *Official Report of the Fukushima Nuclear Accident.*

[13] *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina Lessons Learned* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 2006).

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] "Use of Social Media Tools at FEMA," Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2009, available at <www.fema.gov/news/newsrelease.fema?id=49302>.

[17] Adam Mazmanian, "Of Hurricanes and Hashtags: Disaster Relief in the Social-Media Age," *National Journal*, June 3, 2012, available at <www.nationaljournal.com/tech/of-hurricanes-and-hashtags-disaster-relief-in-the-social-media-age-20120603>.

[18] A hashtag is the pound (#) symbol; it is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages.

[19] *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina.*

[20] "East Asia 2012—Increasing East Asia's Risk Resilience," World Economic Forum, 2012, available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=oF4Eordmczg&feature=youtu.be&noredirect=1>.

[21] Eric Holdeman, "Health-Care Coalition Ensures Service During a Disaster," *Emergency Management*, July 24, 2012, available at <www.emergencymgmt.com/health/Health-Care-Coalition-Service-Disaster.html>.

[22] *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina.*

[23] *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, May 2010).

[24] Ibid.

[25] Laura Quinn and Ellen Van Velsor, "Global Responsibility: What It Takes to Get It Right," *Leadership in Action* 29, no. 6 (January/February 2010), 8–13.