

Who Would You Follow? Or, The Value Of Before-The-Job Training

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On September 13, 2005, President George Bush said, “[Hurricane] Katrina exposed serious problems in our response capability at all levels of government.”¹

Forget about politics for a moment and just be a concerned citizen. Wouldn't it have been nice if President Bush could have announced instead, “Timely simulations of a major hurricane exposed serious problems in our response capability at all levels of government. The simulations helped local, state, and federal officials make major improvements. When Katrina struck, well-prepared officials responded quickly and effectively to save lives and reduce destruction. They kept Katrina's cost to a minimum.”

This time it was a hurricane; the next crisis will probably be something else. Fortunately, whether the next crisis is a major accident, another natural disaster, or a deliberate attack, lessons learned from real-world leadership simulation can help save lives and minimize destruction.

Although no one knows what the next crisis will be, everyone knows that it will take real leadership skills to respond to it. That's why leadership simulations are only partly about rehearsing a response to a specific crisis. They're also about helping leaders gain the special skills they need to respond to whatever crisis hits.

Simulations of a major hurricane hitting the Gulf of Mexico had been conducted long before Hurricane Katrina. Unfortunately, because those exercises focused on emergency responders, they didn't train the leaders who would have to make key decisions. It's like

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/09/13/katrina.response/index.html>

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soldiers learning their jobs in boot camp and then being commanded by untrained leaders.

Would you want to follow an untrained leader into battle?

If you were facing battle, you would learn how to handle a gun, operate a high-tech communications system, or drive a tank. You would expect that your leader has learned how to lead. Not how to give orders or pull rank or read a manual; how to lead. You would expect that he or she knows how to develop an effective strategy, how to adapt to changing circumstances, how to coordinate with other units, and how to make good decisions under fire.

We expect military leaders to have that kind of training. It is possible for civilian leaders to have it, too. That training can greatly help our leaders as they work to protect cities, states, provinces, and nations around the world.

By “leader” I mean the large group of people whose decisions and leadership affect a community’s survival in a crisis. It’s the mayor, the police chief, the fire chief, and the head of emergency services. It’s the FBI, the Coast Guard, and the National Guard. It’s county health officials, state police, and the governor. It’s the people who run the gas and electric utilities, the water system, the airport, the railroad, mass transit, hospitals, and telecommunications. It’s the school officials who decide how to safeguard children, the company executives who decide what employees should do, and the trucking managers who decide when and how to transport critical supplies.

Leaders are more than just a large group; they are a unique group. Their decisions affect each other, they depend on each other, and they don’t have a clear hierarchy.

- Leaders serve different constituencies. For instance, decision makers at an electric utility have to worry about all the communities connected to the power grid, not just the one going through a crisis. They may choose to cut power to one community rather than risk blacking out all of them. That’s why it’s critical for them to understand each other’s jobs, so they won’t make assumptions about what will or won’t happen in a crisis.

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- Leaders' decisions affect each other. A big-company executive may send his or her employees home during a crisis, unintentionally snarling traffic and blocking emergency vehicles, and possibly even trapping the employees in harms' way. That's why it's critical for them to know more than just their piece of the puzzle.
- Leaders may not even meet each other prior to a crisis, yet they must work as an effective team amidst relentless chaos, lack of information, and desperate time pressure. An effective team means coordinating across different areas (e.g., police, fire, utilities, hospitals) and different levels (local, state, and federal). That's why it's critical for them to train as a team.
- Leaders accept extraordinary responsibility; in their hands are the lives and livelihoods of thousands or millions of people. That's why it's critical for them to get the best training we know how to provide.

Dealing with crises is different from dealing with routine events or even emergencies. Crises bring unique challenges that require unique training.

Category 1 hurricanes in Florida are emergencies, not crises, because they are relatively common and Florida knows what to do when they hit. (They also know how to write building codes to minimize hurricane damage.) Katrina was a huge crisis because it combined a massive emergency with novelty.² Airplanes crashing into New York's World Trade Center, zealots detonating a truck bomb at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, terrorists taking over a school in Beslan, revolutionaries capturing an embassy in Tehran, disasters at Chernobyl and Three Mile Island, poison gas at Bhopal, the spread of SARS; all are novel emergencies, all are crises.

Because crises are uncommon or unprecedented, there are no instruction manuals and no done-it-a-thousand-times experts to tell leaders how to cope with them. Yet we need leaders to lead, and because the stakes are so high in crises we need them to lead well. How can leaders learn to make good decisions in situations they haven't faced before? How can they get the experience they need to lead effectively and confidently?

² It was not novel in the sense that no one anticipated it. It was novel in the sense that very few had trained for it.

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The answer is training that goes beyond drills and manuals. The answer is to teach the first-rate decision-making and leadership skills that lead to creative solutions when there is no manual. This kind of leadership isn't "natural;" it must be learned, and it must be learned *before* a crisis hits.

The best training is inexpensive, quick, feedback-rich, and realistic.

- *Inexpensive* doesn't mean low quality. It means training where the price of mistakes is low. All of us make mistakes as we gain experience; the idea is for leaders to make mistakes during training, where no one will get hurt.
- *Quick* doesn't mean rushed. It means efficient. We don't want to spend three years training a leader if he or she will be in the job for four years.
- *Feedback-rich* doesn't mean finger-pointing. It means learning by connecting actions to results. We all need feedback to know if our communication and decisions were effective, and we all benefit from expert teachers and coaches who provide honest, constructive advice.
- *Realistic* doesn't mean extreme precision. It means training in an environment that matches the intensity, chaos, speed, information, emotions, and challenges that the leader will face in a real crisis.

Inexpensive, quick, feedback-rich, realistic training means learning the easy way. When it comes to crises, the alternative — on-the-job training — is horrifically expensive and tragically late.

That sort of easy-way training exists in occupations where lives are at stake, such as flight simulators that airline pilots use to train (and to keep training even after they've been pilots for many years). I don't want a pilot to wonder what to do if an engine explodes in mid-air. I want him or her to *know* what to do and to have done it before. It's not theoretical to me: I was on an airplane when an engine exploded in mid-air, and the pilot knew what to do, and did it well. Simulation might have saved my life.

People learn more from experience than from lectures, and that's why simulation works so well. Simulation brings people as close as possible to the real thing without the ex-

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pense and danger of the real thing. In decades of experience with simulations around the world, I have seen people, even experts, get huge and surprising insights.

What's especially powerful about simulations is what *doesn't* happen. In an intellectual discussion or an academic debate, it's easy to be complacent or to deny that a problem exists. In a realistic simulation, though, complacency and denial simply don't happen. People deal with the problem confronting them, and they learn. They also find it difficult to dismiss the danger when the simulation is over. It's almost like the changes people make in their lives after a near-death experience.

Imagine yourself in the following situation, which was a small part of the simulation my colleagues and I conducted for a large American city.

You are the mayor. A bomb has exploded on a bridge as cars and a train passed over it. Vehicles and their occupants fall into the river and onto the river banks. Fire fighters and police swarm to the site, followed by emergency medical personnel. A victim is trapped underneath a car. He is bleeding to death. The only way to get him out is to amputate the limb that's caught under the car. Medics are preparing to do exactly that.

Then the police discover a suspicious box nearby. It could be another bomb. Terrorists have been known to plant secondary bombs, designed to kill the crowds and first responders that arrive on a disaster scene.

Do you let the medics stay onsite so they can extricate the trapped person? If you do and if the suspicious box turns out to be a bomb, many people will die. If you tell the medics to evacuate, the trapped person will surely die, and the suspicious box may turn out to be harmless. What would you do? If it's a bomb, it could go off any second. If you call for more information, the bomb (if it is a bomb) could go off while you wait. *Decide!*

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That was just one part of the scenario. The mayor and other leaders had to make that decision (and many others) amid chaos and confusion, where nothing was known with certainty and a city was in danger.

The point is not whether the mayor made the “right” decision. After all, we could have made the box be a bomb or not be a bomb in the simulation. The point is for the mayor to gain value from the experience of that awful situation. Not from a book or a lecture or a tabletop exercise, where everything seems neat, simple, and logical. Rather, from living through it, from *feeling* it. Feeling is believing.

A leader who has lived through a realistic simulated crisis is more likely to stay calm, focused, and effective in a real crisis than is a leader facing the crisis for the first time.

Many leaders have developed decision-making and leadership skills that work well during normal times. However, training for normal times would be like making an airline pilot sit through hours in a simulator flying through clear, turbulence-free skies in a perfectly functioning aircraft. What few leaders have is well-developed decision-making and leadership skills for times of crisis, for the simple (and fortunate) reason that true crises are rare. So, if we want leaders to be experienced in handling crises, we need to create the (simulated) crisis conditions – pressure, chaos, emotion, confusion, life-and-death choices – that they’ll face in real life.

People behave one way when they are calm and intellectual, as they are when they participate in tabletop exercises, read manuals, or listen to commission reports. They behave very differently when they are enveloped in crisis conditions. For instance, I helped create the terrorist-attack simulation, and I knew it inside out. If anyone knew the “right” decisions, it would be me. Yet when I role-played the mayor during a test of the simulation, I made serious mistakes in the heat of the moment. My intentions were good and my knowledge was comprehensive... and my mistakes cost many simulated lives. That experience changed me. I won’t forget it, and I want those who are entrusted with public safety to make their mistakes in a simulator, not with real lives.

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Simulations help leaders respond effectively in real crises. Simulations can even help *prevent* crises by identifying vulnerabilities that leaders can repair.

On May 25, 1979, American Airlines flight 191 crashed on takeoff at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. The DC-10 lost its left engine, after which the aircraft rolled to the left, stalled, and crashed. All 271 people on board the plane lost their lives, as did two people on the ground.

According to the National Transportation Safety Board, the aircraft wasn't doomed because it lost the engine. It was doomed because it lost the engine *and* the flight crew didn't know what was wrong.³ Lacking that information, they couldn't diagnose or work around the problem. It might have made a difference:

“During the investigation, the NTSB asked 13 qualified pilots to fly various takeoff profiles. 70 takeoff simulations were flown. All crashed the airplane when flying the crash profile. Several pilots, when left to their own devices, and with extensive knowledge of the events, managed to control the airplane, nonetheless, by recognizing the initial roll and applying full opposite aileron and significant rudder, and lowering the nose to gain air-speed. All pilots who received appropriate feedback, via a functioning stickshaker, and who increased their airspeed to stay above the stickshaker value – 168 knots – saved the airplane.”⁴

The simulations helped uncover ways for one disaster to prevent others in the future, most notably by designing aircraft to give more information to the flight crew. For all I know, insights from those simulations might have helped the flight crew with the exploding engine on the aircraft I was on.

³ Excerpt from National Transportation Safety Board report at http://yarchive.net/air/airliners/dc10_ohare_crash.html

⁴ http://yarchive.net/air/airliners/dc10_ohare_crash.html

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Simulations can help leaders get powerful insights and training in many areas, not just hurricanes, bombs, and air travel.

- Terrorism: an attack on the Internet, a hostage situation, anthrax-infected letters.
- Industrial accidents: a chemical spill, a computer-system crash, a refinery explosion.
- Natural disasters: a volcano, an earthquake, a tsunami.
- Business: a product defect, a power blackout, an accounting scandal.

Part of effective response comes from understanding ripple effects, so real-world leadership simulation cover the critical connections among government, infrastructure, and business. For instance, a public official's decision to close roads, or an accident that interrupts supplies of diesel fuel to trucking companies, can lead to hospitals running out of the supplies they need to treat patients.

The lessons leaders learn in simulations can help them make wise public-policy decisions. For instance, 9/11 rescue efforts in New York City were hampered because communications systems were centralized and the central systems were destroyed. If leaders there knew the possible consequences of losing communications (whether or not it was from a terrorist attack), they would have had the opportunity to have better back-up systems. Of course, other communities now know the dangers of centralized systems because they could see what happened in New York. The cost of that knowledge would be far lower in a simulation, though... and who knows what vulnerabilities are still out there?

Training with simulation gives leaders opportunities to experiment with inconvenient-yet-plausible scenarios that are expensive or prohibitive to run as a physical drill. Take a hospital. One of my colleagues and I heard a hospital official say at a conference that their training programs involved up to 140 casualties streaming in after an accident or attack. We asked why the limit of 140, and we were told that the hospital has 140 beds. In other words, the hospital's training was limited to crises that they could accommodate. But what if they faced a release (accidental or purposeful) of chlorine gas, which could easily generate far more than 140 casualties? What if a report (true or not) of a

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bioterror attack led to the hospital being overrun with panicky citizens who thought they were sick? What if inundated communities nearby sent more casualties?

It's good for hospitals (and other organizations) to run their own exercises, but it's not enough. It's critical to have community-wide training that goes beyond a single location, such as that hospital. The hospital official mentioned that their training assumed police officers would be readily available in sufficient numbers to maintain order at the hospital even if they were flooded by the "walking wounded" after a disaster. But what if the police had been ordered to control traffic (to avoid gridlock) or to search potential targets for more bombs? A key assumption in the hospital's training – law and order – could very easily be false, which could mean the hospital would find itself overwhelmed, incapacitated, or even under attack.

It may be completely rational for the hospital officials to expect police support, and it may also be completely rational for the police to respond to urgent needs away from the hospital. That's why it's so important for your community's leaders to learn as a team. They've got to uncover and understand those interconnections. When they do, they can take action. For instance, the hospital might beef up its internal security forces, or the police might keep some officers at the hospital, or the community might choose to invest in a larger police force.

My colleagues and I have found that there are some not-so-obvious benefits to communities that invest in leader training.

- Decision-making and leadership skills are transferable. In other words, if a leader learns how to make good decisions under pressure in one kind of crisis, he or she can apply that skill in a different crisis.
- He or she can also apply that skill in any job. Leaders move from job to job and from community to community. The more we train, the more an entire nation benefits.
- You only get Super Bowl performance from players who practice together. When a community's leadership team trains together they build the relationships and trust they need to work together. They even learn who they can count on before they have to count on them.

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- The impact of crises can be reduced. For instance, in the chaos of the simulated terrorist bomb on the bridge, real leaders lost track of important communications between the city and the state. As a result, badly needed aid from the state didn't arrive for hours. Knowing about that weakness, they could take action (as simple as assigning an aide to manage those communications) that would prevent the same mistake in a real-life crisis.

It's worth mentioning that even the best simulation-based training cannot guarantee leaders will make all the right decisions and all crises will have happy endings. That's because in a real crisis, leaders must make decisions with incomplete or inaccurate information, and they don't have infinite resources to deploy. What the training does is to greatly raise the odds that leaders will decide wisely. Better decisions means saving more lives, livelihoods, and homes.

What you can do

Communities need leaders who have the skills and experience they'll need in a crisis, and who get those skills and experience *before* the crisis. We need leaders who function under pressure, rather than folding or panicking. We need leaders who make decisions effectively, rather than rushing to decide or waiting too long. We need leaders who make good use of staff and resources, rather than micro-managing or over-delegating. We need leaders who work as a team, rather than handling a high-stress event with strangers.

Leaders are human being, and human beings don't automatically get those critical skills by winning an election, rising through the ranks, or working hard for years under non-crisis conditions. They get those critical skills one of two ways: by going through real crises (where mistakes cost lives) or by going through realistic simulations (where mistakes are free).

We know that people are healthier when they actively manage their health. Similarly, you can actively support survival and prosperity for yourself, your family, and your community.

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- Urge your community's leaders to get simulation-based training. Look for programs that build decision-making and leadership skills. Rather than rehearsing an emergency checklist, make sure the scenarios in the training include "curve balls" that provide the novelty of a crisis. Make it safe for leaders to make mistakes in the training so they won't make the same mistakes in real life. Encourage them to train together as a team, and encourage them to include representatives of government and business who must work together in a crisis.
- If leaders ask for your support, give it to them. A well-prepared, well-trained citizenry is a community's best defense. For instance, if simulation-based training is available to citizens in your community, participate in it. Help your neighborhood help itself by sharing information about who has what skills, who has special needs, and how to contact each other in an emergency. Ask leaders to address community or neighborhood gatherings.

You are a member of many communities. Your city, state, and country. The company where you work. Your children's school districts. Organizations you belong to, from the National Guard to a place of worship to a volunteer fire company. Ask your community's leaders questions such as these:

- How well do you understand the key vulnerabilities and interconnections within our community and with others (government, infrastructure, business, etc.) outside our community? How well do you understand the cascading effects of your decisions and of decisions made by others?
- Are our community's plans and drills realistic for complex crises that can have long-term effects? Do you limit those plans and drills to simple effects at a single location?
- In an emergency do you know how to communicate effectively with those who need to know, including the public, the media, infrastructure owners, private businesses, and those who take part in coping with the emergency? How will you communicate if the power goes out or telephones stop working?
- What vulnerabilities have you discovered that would put our community at risk in different kinds of crisis? What are you doing to repair those vulnerabilities? How can we, the people, help?
- Do you know the exact steps to take to call for assistance from other levels of government? Have you trained with other parts of the government to ensure you and they are in sync?

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- Do you, and other leaders in interconnected areas, practice in a realistic process that stresses the pressure and chaos you will face in a real crisis? Have you done that training as a team? Recently? What action did you take as a result of the training?
- Do you only practice established plans and routines, or do you also practice, as a team, improvising solutions for new, unanticipated situations?
- Have you brought in experts to validate our community's planning and training? Have you communicated how you've been planning and training to build confidence in your leadership? Have you told us, your constituents, what to do and how we can help if a crisis hits?

Someday your community may have to follow its leaders to do battle with a real-life crisis. You can make a difference. Take action to prepare yourself and support your community's leaders in getting the training they need.

About the author

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