The success paradox: Avoiding the traps

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In the section “The metaphor,” the response to the World Trade Centre in New York has been judged a success. Psychologically, it has been important to find something positive in this crisis in order to retain morale and build community resilience. The unprecedented nature of the attack has made it the best they had. However, the accepted definition of success is not absolute. While not wanting to discount the bravery and heroism of responders that day, we felt it is more important to use an objective definition in the assessment – did people die unnecessarily after the attack? The answer one must give is a ‘yes’.

One reason is a failure in communication. Police in a helicopter alongside the Towers saw the deteriorating conditions on the upper floors yet didn’t relay this information to the first responders rushing into the building from below. Part of the issue was inadequate equipment; also at issue is whether different agencies thought to converge in the midst of the crisis. Eight years later, while great progress has been made in New York (see p47), that isn’t the case. Many responders do not communicate with the media and elected officials will judge the next major incident with a different set of expectations. After this painful lesson and the subsequent investments in equipment and technical training, the failure of responders from different departments or agencies to communicate will not be easily forgiven. Another often observed problem is care and a frequently made mistake in care is failing to adjust quality in relation to the quantity of care that is mandated after a Mass Casualty Event (MCE). Medical personnel responding to the Madrid train bombings in 2004 set up a field hospital in order to administer care to the extent that they would if there had only been a few casualties. This was consistent with training to take advantage of the “golden hour” – the long-window of time that best results are achieved when care is administered in the first hour after a traumatic accident. However, field locations – especially at the site of a bombing where there may be additional blocks – are not ideal for stabilizing and treating patients. The emphasis must be on getting care to as many victims as possible and the proper action is to examine the medical condition and then transport to them. The goal is that the nearest hospital is likely to overrun with victims needing less care and consequently cannot be able to handle those with more urgent need. The primary role of the nearest medical facility should be triage and planners should have vehicles on hand to transport victims to appropriate facilities. The less severe the injury, the more distant the facility can be. Significant attention has been paid to technical training and purchasing equipment, which are a critical part of the equation. There are managerial and tactical lives to each of the specific mistakes we have mentioned here, however, these are obviously not sufficient to ensure an effective response. There must be greater emphasis on leadership and decision-making issues, particularly among these officials for whom crisis preparedness is not a primary focus, yet who wield enormous influence over how well things will go when disaster strikes. A leadership failure can only be remedied by a leadership solution. As we introduced in the previous article (CR5:2), the leaders who are most effective in emergency response situations are what we call ‘meta-leaders’. Just as ‘meta-research’ seeks themes across many lines of study, these meta-leaders catalyse co-ordinated action that crosses organisational boundaries and hierarchical restrictions. They have learned to use influence to lead beyond the confines of their formal order. In doing so, they increase their impact and that of their organisations. They understand that their units or agencies act as part of a response eco-system and that success is tied to the performance of the entire system. There are five dimensions of meta-leadership:

- **Self-awareness and problem assessment**
- **Situational awareness and insightful diagnostics**
- **Effective leadership down to your organisational base or unit**
- **Effective leadership up to your boss or whenever you are accountable**
- **Effective leadership across to peers at other agencies and stakeholders, such as community groups and private sector companies**

This is cross-system connectivity, that allows the entire response network to best meet the challenges of unexpected or fast-changing situations. The leadership project is to minimise and anticipate and situational awareness, are critical because in a crisis the only leader can recognise what is changing, what mistakes might be about to be made, and what resources are needed. In the midst of an MCE, information will surface that contradicts what has already been accepted as fact. The meta-leader must sort through the cognitive dissonance to find truth rather than discounting that which doesn’t fit. Afterwards there will be plenty of people to point out all the imperfections in the response, but in the moment when the response can still be adjusted and modified, you must be able to diagnose what is really happening and make the tough calls.

**Crossroad**

Dimensions three, four, and five are the levers of organisational action. By leveraging resources up, down, and across the response system, the meta-leader converts the organisational assets, defeats, those to greatest benefit, spends action and reaction, and improves overall system response. Leading up and across, in particular, requires the skillful use of influence as there will be no direct power of authority. Failure to make all of these decisions will result in a sub-optimal outcome. The goal of meta-leadership is resilience – personal, organisational, and systemic. Resilience allows the leader, the unit, or the entire response system to absorb the impact of an MCE, perceive specifics, adapt, and respond appropriately. It is measured by the speed at which the response crosses the gap between the status quo and the new time line. When the meta-leader defines success as resilience, he acknowledges that the plan is not perfect and that the leader preserves mental bandwidth to look outside of the frame and identify unanticipated activity, seemingly unrelated events, or get-indisted blips on the radar that may have an impact on the effectiveness of the response. Curiosity is an essential for meta-leaders; they should never stop asking questions and examining assumptions. Resilient meta-leaders realise that members of the general public are the first responders to any incident. When a bomb rips through a crowded train, it is fellow passengers who will first tend to wounds and lead an escape. Their actions can make the difference between life and death, and failure be the professional responders because they can either begin to bring order to the scene of mayhem or the chaos to the general public in their plans although they can be a valuable resource. Civic leaders would do well to seek to build resilience among the total population by equipping them to be both first responders and first ‘preventers’. There are two types of resilience to measure: that of the response system and that of the population involved. If success is closing the gap between the deviation and the norm in ways that meet or exceed expectations, you have to understand those expectations and how they align with yours. Populations that are frequently subjected to bombings or rocket attacks for example, such as Iraqis or Israelis, will have expectations more in line with those of responders because both will have enough shared experience to understand what happens in such an event.

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they were grateful for the work submitted. His effectiveness leading his own team enhanced his credibility with the larger group. They quickly came to agreement about the plan and brought it to the President who subsequently approved it.

How does this relate to the success paradox? The new DHS wanted to establish its credibility and defined success in terms of its own performance. Similarly those existing agencies that were perceived to have failed on 9/11, such as the intelligence agencies, defined success as rebuilding their credibility and so were excessively concerned with the role their organisations would play in any response plan.

Henderson, on the other hand, defined success in the proper context: an effective response plan to protect the public that would be in place before an attack occurred. Everything else — who got the credit, whose resources were used/where, etc — were all secondary to the larger goal.

CR O S S H E A D

He led his staff convincingly and got his people to embrace that larger goal. They took on work that, in strict bureaucratic terms, should have been shouldered by a broader group across a number of agencies. They didn’t flinch; they delivered.

He led deftly by presenting the plan to the Washington group in a way that gained its approval. He could show that the plan was based on logic and thoughtful analysis without bias for his own agency. He presented it as a contribution to help the Washington group reach its objectives and enabled everyone to focus on the ultimate goal of rapidly developing an effective plan. He led up skillfully by letting the senior-most members of the Washington group take the plan to the President for implementation. There was no demand that it be presented as a CDC plan or that the CDC receive any special credit.

His focus remained on success as he defined it: the adoption of a solid plan in time to respond to a possibly imminent attack. How can you avoid the success paradox? The first step is to think broadly and deeply about how you define success. Imagine all of the different stakeholders involved and how they would define it. Distil that into a compelling vision for success that you can embrace and that will engage those you employ, who employ you and the peers with who you must co-ordinate.

Second, build your own grid based on these articles. Put the mistakes down the left-hand side. Start with our list, subtract any that are irrelevant and add any of your own that come to mind. Across the top make columns for the broad groups of stakeholders: government (with sub-columns for national, state, and local recommended); community (including hospitals, NGOs, and the general public); and corporate. Fill in the blocks of this grid with notes about the individuals and organisations with which you must build connectivity. Be specific about whether you need to lead up, down, or across in order to achieve the maximum benefit. Also note in which areas you need to be led as a big part of successfully leading is enabling those to whom you report to lead down to you effectively.

Next, turn that grid into an action plan with concrete steps needed to build resilience in yourself, your organisation, and the entire system. Determine how to best recognise and respond to potential mistakes as they appear and help others do the same.

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