Meta-Leadership Lessons from the 2008 Republican National Convention
An NPLI Case History

National Preparedness Leadership Initiative
A Joint Program of the Harvard School of Public Health and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University
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Vice Presidential nominee Sarah Palin addresses the convention (Photo: Wikipedia Commons).

Background

In September 2008, the Republican National Committee held its Presidential nominating convention in Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN. Months earlier a team of NPLI students (NPLI Class Cohort III) – David Beltz, Security Officer, Director of Security & Safety, Headquarters, Dept. of the Army; Thomas Crowley, Director, Security and Corporate Affairs, Office of Naval Intelligence; and Lisa Dressler, Deputy Director for Emergency Preparedness, City of Minneapolis (she began the project as Public Works Interagency Coordinator, City of Minneapolis Public Works/Management Services and assumed her Deputy Director position in May, 2007) – undertook a project to identify and assist with resolving leadership challenges and security/safety gaps in the city’s plan for hosting the event. The convention was designated a National Special Security Event (NSSE) and was held in the Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul. An NSSE is designated by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) when a major event is thought to have a high potential for a terrorist attack or other security incident. The designation puts the Secret Service in charge of overall event security. The team met twice prior to the convention in Minneapolis with city and state officials involved with security and emergency preparedness. Mr. Beltz and Ms. Dressler also worked at the Minneapolis Multi-Departmental Coordination Center/Emergency Operations Center (MDCC/EOC) during the convention period.

Who’s in Charge?

While the Secret Service is clearly in charge of an NSSE, there can be confusion about who has jurisdiction over ancillary events surrounding but not officially part of the NSSE. Outside of the NSSE, what is the protocol for transporting dignitaries? Closing streets? Arresting protesters? In this case it was determined that each city where an event occurred “owned” it if it was not covered by the NSSE. Jurisdictional issues will inevitably arise. It is critical to work them out in advance to avoid fractured lines of authority & responsibility during the event – especially, in this case, with the added complexities multiple host municipalities.
Finding the Security Balance

A large event like a national political convention is actually multiple events: there is a security event, a political event, a social event, and an economic event to name but a few. Those charged with security will naturally focus most on security concerns but must also understand that local residents still have to live their lives (and they may be most focused on the “traffic events” that may result from security measures taken throughout a convention) and local businesses not only must continue to operate but may be counting on a boost in sales with the influx of visitors. These competing interests call for skillful use of Meta-leadership Dimension Five: leading across. Influence must be called upon as much as authority to achieve security objectives while also meeting the needs of diverse constituencies each with their own expectations and priorities. There may even be conflict between security plans and political reality. In this event, there was a contingent of local politicians who advocated embracing protesters and providing water and food in the name of free speech and public health while others were more concerned with potential damage and violence the protesters might cause. Each side must feel that it has been heard for a satisfactory compromise to be reached.

Plan Early and Often

“If a particular entity, or group of entities, hasn’t been though an event of this scale or complexity before, it may under-plan. You cannot start coordinating too soon,” advised David Beltz.

The NPLI team identified major city, state, and federal stakeholders and encouraged that collaboration and planning begin immediately. “Don’t wait for an invitation to a meeting or for someone else to coordinate meetings,” Beltz said. “Get things moving.” Meetings like these are likely to reveal contingencies not covered in individual agency or jurisdiction plans and protocols as the parties work through the complexities of a major event. In this event, for example, there were the challenges of moving delegates safely and securely back-and-forth between Minneapolis and St. Paul and handling protesters in multiple jurisdictions. There were also multiple communication and logistical considerations including understanding how existing mutual aid agreements would function during the NSSE.

Leveraging Multiple EOCs

With an event as large as a national political convention, multiple agencies will want to “stand up” their emergency operations centers. In this case, cities, counties and the state all activated. This is good in that it presents an opportunity for to live-test capabilities and a single EOC might not have the physical
capacity to handle all of those entities involved in a national event.

In the case of an NSSE, the Secret Service will establish its own Multi-Agency Coordination Center (MACC). At the RNC, this facility lacked video conferencing capability, for example, leading to reported feelings of isolation among those stationed there. Integrating technologies and effectively liaising between facilities will be a constant challenge when multiple coordinating centers are involved. It is critical that the roles and expectations for each be clearly articulated and widely understood.

These multiple EOCs should be thought of as a single network with interdependencies and interactions strategically plotted and widely understood. Responsibilities and accountability must be clearly delineated and protocols for communication and resource allocation established to avoid confusion and missteps. Priority must be placed on ensuring that those in the various facilities know their roles and stay in their lanes.

Each of the EOCs is likely to have its own way of working and even though there may be overlap in protocols and processes, it is important to establish a synchronized “battle rhythm” as early as possible.

Leading the Public
Among the most critical constituencies with which you must coordinate is the general public – both because they need to know what to expect and what you expect of them and because they can be a valuable resource for you: they are the “first observers” and will be the first responders in the case of an incident. Incorporate them into your plans.

Do not forget communities with limited proficiency in English. For the RNC, officials used Emergency and Community Health Outreach (ECHO) partners to reach approximately 85% of these communities with messages in languages such as Spanish, Hmong, Somali, Lao, Vietnamese, Russian, Arabic, Oromo, and Khmer. Address cultural preferences in your communications.

Other Important Ideas
EOC Orientation
Make sure that everyone in the EOC is familiar with the technology that is deployed and where other agencies are seated in the facility. Make it clear what technology and supplies will be provided and what each person is expected to bring from their respective agencies. Think through small details like parking and food carefully – they will reflect on the evaluation of your management and leadership.

Negotiate Information Clearances in Advance
A major event like a convention brings together two considerations that may be at odds: the involvement of a wider range of parties than may normally be in the EOC and law enforcement sensitivities. Establish in advance who has access to which information and structure briefings and dissemination plans accordingly.

Communication is Always Important
The City of Minneapolis Communications Department had several telephone check-ins every day, in an effort to keep all communication clear and
consistent According to Lisa Dressler, “this worked relatively well.”

Don’t Learn Lessons the Hard Way
This report captures only meta-leadership lessons learned. There are many operational lessons as well. Be in touch with officials at cities that have hosted similar events to the one for which you are planning and ask to review their plans, after-action reviews, and other documentation. This will give you a head start in your own planning and may help you avoid missteps.

Key Take-Aways
✓ Accountability is not always clear. Be sure to articulate “who’s in charge” not just for the main event but for all ancillary events in order to avoid confusion.

✓ You can’t plan too early. A national political convention is a unique event and will present challenges you have not encountered before. The earlier you begin to plan, the more time you’ll have to uncover all of the potential bumps in the road.

✓ The public must be led. That means understanding their expectations and being able to communicate on their terms (and in their languages).
About the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative

The NPLI, a joint program of the Harvard School of Public Health and Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, was established in 2004 to help ensure that public officials are prepared to meet the challenge of mass casualty terrorist attacks through training and research. The initiative is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

About Meta-Leadership

The meta-leadership framework and practice method is part of the initiative’s curricula and was developed by Drs. Leonard Marcus and Barry Dorn, co-director and associate director of the NPLI, respectively; Colonel (Ret.) Isaac Ashkenazi, formerly Surgeon General of the Israel Defense Forces Home Front Command; and Joseph Henderson, formerly director of the CDC Office of Terrorism Preparedness and Emergency Response.

“Graduates of the NPLI executive education program report that this framework has made a significant difference when applied in their real world,” said Marcus. “For example, several related that what they learned through the NPLI had informed their response to Hurricane Gustav and preparations for the Obama inauguration. They reached out to each other and coordinated their actions more pro-actively than they otherwise would have. This sort of meta-leadership in a crisis or other major event has important public health impact insofar as agencies are better able to serve the population and reduce the loss of life.”

The Meta-leadership framework has five dimensions to teach leadership skills:

1) personal self-knowledge and awareness;
2) diagnosis of the situation;
3) leading one’s organizational base;
4) leading up, or understanding and delivering on the expectations of one’s superiors; and
5) leading connectivity among people and organizations over which the leader does not have direct control.

The meta-leadership framework and vocabulary have become common across a swath of the government preparedness and public health communities. Marcus and Dorn have led more than 400 training sessions including efforts with the leadership at the CDC, DHHS, and the National Security Council of the White House. A national series of seminars for business, non-profit, philanthropic, and public leaders — the Meta-Leadership Summits for Preparedness sponsored by the CDC Foundation and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation — is also under way.

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