Meta-Leadership Lessons from the 2008 Iowa Floods

An NPLI Case History
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Background
The Iowa floods of 2008 were the fifth largest disaster in U.S. history up to that time. Davenport, Iowa has nine miles of waterfront and, having chosen not to have a structural levee, is subject to periodic flooding. It is the only city of its size or larger without a permanent levee system (see Appendix A).

According to Craig Malin (NPLI Class Cohort III), City Administrator in Davenport, the city has a strong relationship with the river. One of the reasons they don’t have levees is that they don’t want to cut the city off from “their” river.

A Trust in Resilient People
The pipe failure required that every other city along the Mississippi has told its people, “We have a levee to protect us. Don’t worry.” Davenport has opted for no levee and sees this as a more adaptive, fiscally responsible, resilient, and practical approach. The flood plan is public on the Web and constantly tweaked. In the case of an approaching flood, the city builds temporary earthen levees on River Drive. They keep a stockpile of dirt available and everyone is primed to make it as smooth and fast a process as possible to put the levee where they need it, when they need it – and then get it out again when the waters recede. They have become adept at 3-D modeling so they can understand the effects during different flood scenarios.

In other cities, structural levees have proven susceptible to failure. “‘Things’ fail – and are doing so with some regularity as climate change drives unprecedented weather conditions,” said Malin.

Davenport’s approach is to put its faith in and attention toward leadership and resilient people. In a flood fight, 90% of the city’s personnel will be involved. Malin likes to hire “triathlete MacGyvers” because he feels that Davenport must be a “can do” city. “We trust in adequately resourced, well-trained, properly led personnel committed to the mission rather than a ‘thing’ like a levee. Once the ‘thing’ fails, it’s useless. People are more resilient. They’ll find a way to get the job done,” Malin said.

Protecting Modern Woodman Park
Davenport is engaged in a bi-state brown field redevelopment program with Rock Island, across the river, that is turning former industrial space into civic space. 95% of it is green space; 5% of it is “classic old structures” they’ve saved. This River Renaissance
project earned Davenport a 2010 Siemens Sustainable Community Award.

Of particular importance is Modern Woodmen Park, a circa 1931 ballpark that is now home to the Quad City River Bandits. It flooded in 2001 and the team lost the entire season. In 2004, the city and ballclub completed a $14 million renovation of the ballpark rather than move it. They included about $1.5 million in flood protection systems that allow it to become an island during a flood. In the first 2008 flood, minor league baseball wouldn’t play in the ballpark as an island because they felt the risk was too great. To prove that the flood protection system would work and that the park was suitable for play, the city organized a Little League tournament and local home run derby.

In the second 2008 flood, the city took all of the liability so that the minor league would approve play. Malin felt that the stadium should be a symbol of the city and “didn’t want a flooded ballpark broadcast on CNN.” They had to work for around the clock for three straight days to get things ready.

In the midst of this, there was the worst rainfall ever in 4 hours. There was a fire downtown and firefighters were fighting the fire in waist deep water. A firefighter fell and was paralyzed. The city couldn’t get him to Iowa City for treatment as the regional flooding had closed Interstate 80 and weather precluded flying him to Peoria. In the midst of this torrential lightning (that started the fire) and rain that created flash flooding on city streams (while the Mississippi continued to rise) the Fire Department got the injured firefighter (now retired on disability) to Peoria by ambulance.

The plan for the evening was to fill a gap in the sandbag levee protecting the front of the ballpark overnight but public work crews couldn’t get there because of the flash flooding. One guy was there and Craig pitched in to help because that’s all you can do at that point. Three firefighters finally show up and the work gets finished. They had no way to communicate with the rest of the city during this time. It worked and the field was able to be used despite the floods. One newspaper headline credited Davenport with an “Unsinkable Spirit.”

**A Catalyst for Connectivity**

The people in Davenport have a great knowledge of water and how to work with it as a result of this long history with the river and its propensity to flood. During Hurricane Katrina, the city sent teams to help in New Orleans that helped build some immunity and team loyalty that would be useful during the 2008 floods.

“Floods always surprise you even though you know they are coming and what to expect,” said Malin. “100 year flood scenarios are quaint in this world. We see 300 year and 500 year floods fairly regularly in the world today.”

“Floods are the catalyst for year-round connectivity between departments and also link the city government to its citizens,” he concluded.
Key Take-Aways

✓ Just as knowing oneself is the first dimension of meta-leadership for an individual, so too is it for a community. Davenport’s flood preparedness and response strategy is built on an understanding of community history and values.

✓ Population resilience is critical to response. Davenport has built this both by making people rather than “things” the lynchpin to their efforts and by ensuring that iconic structures such as Modern Woodmen Park are protected.

✓ Continuous connectivity among agencies and across sectors is both a critical process and beneficial output of intentional meta-leadership.
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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