

Meta-Leadership and National Emergency Preparedness: A Model to Build Government Connectivity

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Effective emergency preparedness and response requires leadership that can accomplish perceptive coordination and communication amongst diverse agencies and sectors. Nevertheless, operating within their specified scope of authority, preparedness leaders in characteristic bureaucratic fashion often serve to bolster the profile and import of their own organization, thereby creating a silo effect that interferes with effective systemwide planning and response. This article describes a strategy to overcome traditional silo thinking: “meta-leadership,” overarching leadership that intentionally connects the purposes and work of different organizations or organizational units. Thinking and operating beyond their immediate scope of authority, meta-leaders provide guidance, direction, and momentum across organizational lines that develop into a shared course of action and a commonality of purpose among people and agencies that are doing what may appear to be very different work. Meta-leaders are able to imaginatively and effectively leverage system assets, information, and capacities, a particularly critical function for organizations with emergency preparedness responsibilities that are constrained by ingrained bureaucratic patterns of behavior.

THE ACUTE THREAT of internationally driven and homeland-directed terrorism has changed the rules and expectations for government action, interaction, and willpower. Unprecedented coordination of resources, information, and expertise is required, both in the face of new hazards emanating from an elusive yet active and well-organized network of hostile terrorist cells,¹ as well as in managing naturally occurring events, a possible global avian flu pandemic chief among them. While the period since 9/11 has witnessed a spate of government reorganization and restructuring—the most visible in the speedy consolidation of 22 agencies to form the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the 9/11 Commission’s recommended revamping of intelligence agencies²—the hoped-for change in behavior and impact has

lagged far behind shifts in organizational form and mandate.³ The 2005 Hurricane Katrina response was the first major, complex catastrophic event to test DHS capabilities, and the results revealed profound system weaknesses. The difficulties in creating effective response capacity are alarming given the enormity of the threats along with the consequences of less-than-optimal prevention, emergency preparedness, and response. How can the resistance and slow pace of change be understood, and what can be done strategically to accelerate realization of full national preparedness potential?

The vast literature and experience on the difficulties of accomplishing any sort of quick organizational overhaul need not be recounted here.⁴ Suffice it to say that the silo or “stovepipe” effect of distinct and deeply ingrained bu-

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reaucratic cultures, budgets, and narrowly focused career ascendancy compels government agencies toward self-protectiveness, insularity, and allegiance to their own agency-based advocacy and independence. There also are long-standing traditions of rivalry and palpable struggles for control, especially among organizations with similar or overlapping missions and scope of responsibility.⁵ These rivalries, when imposed on preparedness for and the response to an unprecedented terrorist attack, can compound what is already disastrous, as was seen in New York on 9/11 between the fire and police departments, two interdependent agencies with a history of antagonism. Once first responders arrived on the scene, radios could not communicate, separate command centers were established, and information was not shared. In the heat of the moment, that lack of coordination translated into higher mortality and morbidity figures for firefighters at the World Trade Center. Closely observing the flaming buildings from an NYPD helicopter, police officers foresaw the collapse of the towers and radioed police to evacuate. The message, because connections had not previously been established, never reached firefighters, who continued to stream into the flaming structure.^{6,7}

A similar failure of connectivity and coordination occurred in March 2005, when suspected anthrax at a Department of Defense post office was confirmed without first informing and validating with the Department of Homeland Security, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and local officials. The subsequent alert, which caused hundreds of employees to be placed on preventive antibiotic treatment, turned out to be a false positive.⁸

Since the initial shock of 9/11, there certainly have been important efforts to improve cooperation. For example, the February 2003 adoption of *Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 (HSPD-5)* establishes “a single, comprehensive national incident management system.”⁹ HSPD-5 led to adoption of the National Response Plan (NRP), built on the template of the National Incident Management System (NIMS).¹⁰ Despite this progress, there remains a troublesome possibility that during a mass casualty incident, emergency responders once again will clash, the public will be given conflicting information, and lives will be unnecessarily lost simply because agency leaders now, in the pre-event preparatory period, did not come to terms with the critical need to achieve a versatile capacity for connectivity: that bigger and coherent picture of distinct, consistent, and overlapping roles and responsibilities necessary to counter and defuse terrorist challenges.¹¹ On matters of leadership decision-making and agency interaction, precise plans and refined models have yet to be uniformly established, tested, and deeply ingrained.

The country does not at present have the luxury of patiently waiting while agencies take their time to adjust operating procedures and protocols: Progress in achieving a protected homeland needs to be quicker and deeper than what would occur in the normal course of governmental change and response.¹² Documents and declarations alone will not foment the necessary change. There is, after all, significant danger facing the country—from both manmade and natural threats—and the slow pace of preparedness itself increases national vulnerability. What will it take to accelerate the pace?

AN EXPANDED NOMENCLATURE FOR LEADERSHIP: META-LEADERSHIP

One critical ingredient is competent leadership. Organizational change occurs slowly, and it offers solutions to problems in the long run, as a gradual, evolutionary process. Similarly, on paper, plans and protocols may not fit the unique contingencies of a particular emergency, or even, as was in part the case during the Katrina response, those prearranged procedures may be disregarded. Individual people—capable leaders—however, can and should be more agile and adaptive in the short run, able to prompt the sort of resilient and flexible organizational response required for quick and immediate change.¹³

The problem, of course, is that well-intended leaders—practicing what they believe is effective leadership—could be just as much part of the problem as they are part of the solution. Leadership could work—and it has—to fortify the bureaucratic silo mentality of agencies—this despite the fact that it is the coordinated action of many agencies working together that is essential to advancing the national preparedness effort. It was that lack of coordinated action among local, state, and federal leadership just before and in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that significantly amplified the destructive impact of the winds and the devastating aftermath of the New Orleans levee failures. Leadership, as commonly understood, works to build the capacity within organizations. We premise here that a different brand of leadership is necessary to get beyond that silo thinking to achieve the cross-agency and cross-government coordination of strategy and effort required for national terrorism and emergency preparedness.

The answer to that question could very well lie in what is introduced in this article as “meta-leadership.” The prefix “meta” as used here refers to overarching leadership that connects the purposes and the work of different organizations or organizational units. Just as “meta-research” refers to identification of broader themes and conclusions that emerge from a body of related investigation, and “meta-analysis” refers to a frame of reference

that joins diverse thinking into a coherent framework, “meta-leadership” refers to guidance, direction, and momentum across organizational lines that develops into a shared course of action and a commonality of purpose among people and agencies that are doing what appears to be very different work.

Achieving quick and effective national preparedness requires an array of government and nongovernment bureaucracies to coordinate their planning, collaboration, and response to anticipated terrorist acts.¹⁴ Leaders who are able to influence and accomplish such collaboration of effort across organizations—multi-jurisdictional, multi-agency, and public-private—are termed “meta-leaders.” These leaders connect with, influence, and integrate the activities of diverse agencies, thereby motivating interaction, enhancing communication, and engendering the sort of cross-organizational confidence necessary for effective terrorism preparedness and emergency response.¹⁵

They are able to legitimately and productively reach beyond their scope of authority and responsibility and, in the process, are able to generate linkages of purpose and activity that amplify their outcomes and impact.¹⁶ They leverage information and resources across agencies, extending what any unit alone could accomplish, by reducing interagency friction and creating a synergy of progress.¹⁷ These meta-leaders achieve “connectivity,” defined here as a seamless web of people, organizations, resources, and information that can best catch (detect and report), respond (control and contain), and return to prevent normal (recover) from a terrorist incident. Connectivity—among agencies, organizations, and people with complementary missions—is one by-product of meta-leadership.¹⁸

Meta-leaders require a distinct mindset, a unique set of skills, and a network to encourage cross-agency thinking, risk taking, and productivity.¹⁹ Meta-leadership compels those who practice it to go beyond their job descriptions, since achieving unprecedented and groundbreaking cross-organizational collaboration is itself beyond the experience, mission, and task of any single organization or agency alone.

The actions of the U.S. Coast Guard during the Hurricane Katrina response exemplified these qualities. Recognizing the plight of New Orleans residents stranded on the roofs of their homes, the Coast Guard immediately dispatched a continuous stream of helicopter search and rescue missions, not impeded by though in coordination with other government agencies. Eventually, overall leadership of the response effort was transferred to a Coast Guard Vice Admiral, who, by the time the second hurricane (Rita) descended on the area, had opened new and more credible lines of communication and cooperation.²⁰

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND SYSTEM META-LEADERSHIP: COMMONALITIES AND DISTINCTIONS

What is the difference between organizational leadership and system meta-leadership?²¹

Leaders derive their power and influence first from their formal job descriptions and authority. For example, an organizational leader who has budget authority is able to significantly command the behavior and compliance of his or her direct reports. Power and influence is to some extent embedded into the structure and operation of the organization.²²

Meta-leaders work in a far less scripted fashion. They seek to influence what happens in other organizations, though this effort is in large measure a matter of effective negotiation and the development of personal and organizational credibility that stretches across organizational lines. It is easiest to establish cross-organizational influence when bringing something of value to the table, as would generally occur in a formal negotiation. In essence, one can begin the process of achieving connectivity by purchasing it—through a business deal or memorandum of understanding—as part of a contractual deal between entities.

It is far more difficult when the meta-leader is advocating adherence to a set of common goals and purposes for which there may be little or no direct compensation. And it is even more difficult when those shared purposes require sacrifice, the reduction of autonomy and independence, or a change in culture or operating procedures.²³ Such is sometimes the case for those who seek to advance cross-agency or multi-jurisdictional coordinated governmental action to achieve national preparedness, a mission that while laudatory flies in the face of the political culture to which agencies, their Congressional overseers, and career staff have become accustomed.

Finally, it is most difficult when efforts to accomplish connectivity involve creating new relationships among traditionally competitive agencies. Deeply embedded antagonisms and powerful proclivities to contest control and authority complicate any effort to enhance collaboration. The meta-leader risks not only failure of the effort. There is beyond that the professional peril that one’s colleagues can grow skeptical of this consorting with the “enemy,” while the “enemy” delights in the failure of efforts to create a shared enterprise. This phenomenon of social and collegial distancing occurs both on the horizontal plane as well as vertically between different levels of government. When agency leaders with critical and overlapping preparedness functions are prevented by department leadership in Washington from meeting with one another, opportunities for connectivity are thwarted and those people who reach out are frustrated. The pur-

suit of meta-leadership under such circumstances can be professionally dangerous and even painful.²⁴

Another distinction between traditional leadership and meta-leadership as it pertains to national preparedness is that the former is focused on a known and time-honored tradition of organizational direction and accomplishment. While leaders traditionally have been responsible for steering the course of their organizations, meta-leaders must chart a new course in coordination with a range of other agencies generally outside the purview of prior organizational experience or responsibility. This is particularly relevant for the evolving Homeland Defense section of the Department of Defense as it charts a new domestic mission, assisting in the response to a terrorist incident or massive emergency within United States borders, and requiring development of new roles, relationships, interactions, and activities.

Organizations, like cultures, provide a source of familiarity, support, and even comfort for those accustomed to working within them. More than may be generally acknowledged, people fancy the known and safe zone of their chosen profession or career.²⁵ Leadership, credibility, and experience grow within the time-honored and conventional confines of that work. It can then be uncomfortable to engage outside of that known sphere of influence. Meta-leaders are able to accomplish the task, feeling and acting at ease even when engaging with people beyond their professional domain or expertise, able to act comfortably in someone else's space and making others feel welcomed and accepted in theirs.

In May 2003, this mindset was in place in New Sweden, Maine, where churchgoers fell ill after drinking arsenic-laced coffee. Benefiting from just-introduced preparedness staffing and cross-agency training in the state, first responders, public health epidemiologists, and law enforcement officials were able to coordinate efforts to identify the toxic agent and mount a prompt medical response. Metaphorically, it could be said that meta-leaders are able to speak multiple languages, are fluent in their own professional lingo, and are able to talk the talk of others.²⁶ They absorb and credibly apply concepts, facts, and vocabulary particular to other fields of work and are therefore in a better position to encourage a connectivity of effort.

The most important distinction between leaders and meta-leaders is their relative breadth of focus and intercession. "Leaders" as used and distinguished here refers to those working within organizations that authorize and condone their leadership. That leadership is buttressed by the many cohesive and defined rudiments of organizational structure: the organizational chart, policies, procedures, rules, lines of authority, measurable outcomes, standards, behavioral expectations, and sanctions for violations of the above. These artifacts provide the framework through which the leader leads.²⁷

By contrast, meta-leaders operate without many of these supports, linking organizations and people often without the benefit of established authority, precedent, and consensus on what should be done or exactly how it should be accomplished. The ambition as well as the art of meta-leadership thrives in the creation of something new and something that is mission driven.²⁸ As it pertains to matters of national preparedness, leaders often very capably harness organizations to pursue their traditional missions and allegiances. By contrast, where there has been a synergy of effort and true innovation across agencies, it has been meta-leaders who encouraged people and organizations to extend beyond their traditional scope of interest and activity.

These qualities were in evidence among those who, during the December 2003–January 2004 "orange alert" declared by the Department of Homeland Security, were able to strategically organize available intelligence into specific categories of risk, develop a plan to respond to each, and then obtain buy-in across the responsible agencies.²⁹ These meta-leaders have risen from provincial thinking to drive preparedness as a systems endeavor, fashioning innovative, complex, adaptive, and flexible governmental capabilities essential now in responding to the emerging threats.³⁰ They further recognize that preparedness is not merely a government function, and that the private sector, to include multinational corporations and nongovernmental organizations, must also be actively engaged in the endeavor. In so doing, the meta-leader is able to leverage an outcome that is far bigger than the sum of its parts.

The practice of meta-leadership and the accomplishment of its objectives, as laudable as they may be, are complicated by the fact that its execution is outside traditional lines of organizational advancement, that it does not always provide reward for its achievement, and that it has an uncomfortably public quality to it. What does it take in practice to be an accomplished meta-leader?

THE ART AND PRACTICE OF META-LEADERSHIP: UNIQUE SKILLS, CAPACITIES, AND PERSPECTIVES

For the meta-leader, "out-of-the-box" is a frame of reference and way of thinking. The "box" and all that goes with it—sanction, authority, the known, and the comfortable—are of relatively less importance than the combined potential achievable by the system if it were to operate as an intentionally interwoven network of connected parts.³¹ The meta-leader perceives that potential. He or she endeavors to give that image meaning, purpose, and a conduit toward achievement.

The art of meta-leadership derives from the capacity to

envision a new connectivity of strategy and effort and then to find a way to communicate, inspire, and persuade broader participation.³² It is a creative and, most important, a transformational endeavor. The meta-leader must often impart significance to a vision or objective that does not already exist. Exceptional talent is required to describe that bigger picture and then imbue it with meaning that alters what others think and do. It is a difficult task. Through their behavior and actions, meta-leaders are able to motivate people to follow along, a particularly impressive feat given the fact that they operate without the direct power or authority to “order” others to follow. Abstract goals and objectives of preparedness and homeland security—for example, cross-agency preparations for a special national security event such as a highly visible sporting competition or political gathering³³—assume tangible meaning, and, with that, the meta-leader is able to mold actions toward the most important outcomes and impact.

To accomplish this feat, the meta-leader appreciates the distinct values, goals, motives, and missions of the different organizational silos that are recruited to coordinated action. He or she grasps how those differences could actually complement one another, even as they are generally seen as the rationale for waging battles for control. How is this accomplished?

The meta-leader connects disparate groups by aligning core interests and motivations, redefining success not as a silo-driven objective but rather as a product of the combined action and interaction of the multiple silos working in a coordinated synchronization. In other words, each of the parts recognizes that its individual success is derived in some measure from the success of the whole endeavor.³⁴

By aligning goals and objectives, the meta-leader is able to encourage—sometimes diplomatically nudge—movement toward achievement of those newly discovered and overlapping motivations and, with that, creates a synergy of effort, a reduction of competition and waste, and a new efficiency of coordination and cooperation.³⁵

A meta-leader not only comprehends the bigger picture: By virtue of setting the stage for effective understanding and communication, the meta-leader is able to persuade others as well to see and be motivated by that enlarged vision for what needs to be done and how it can be achieved. An example of this principle in practice is the establishment of “coordinating centers” by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. These new functions, such as the Coordinating Center for Infectious Diseases, and the people who direct them have the task of integrating the heretofore separate scientific endeavors of the many Centers that comprise the agency, linkages that will be critical in coordinating the response to a bioterrorist incident or pandemic flu. Whether or not these new functions prove to be effective is yet unknown.

In order to accomplish the task, with so much to perceive and so much to integrate, the meta-leader engages imaginative multidimensional problem solving. This mind-set requires looking at a problem and its considerations from all key angles. It has the meta-leader seeking pertinent questions and then surveying a wide breadth of information relevant to the mission at hand, often then reaching well beyond his or her range of expertise and direct experience. Who are the key stakeholders? And since each of these stakeholders likely defines the presenting problem very differently, what are each of their unique interests and perspectives on the relevant challenge or question? Given the many takes on what needs to be done, what is it that must be accomplished, both for each of the individual constituents as well as for solving the bigger problem? How does this newly forming conceptualization break down into a reasonable set of priorities? What obstacles or frictions must be accounted for? And how can success be defined and redefined in terms that are reasonable, achievable, and acceptable to the array of concerned stakeholders?

Effective multidimensional problem solving describes “situational awareness” at its very best, seeing both the problems to be resolved as well as the people and assets that can be constructively brought to bear. The meta-leader is a quick study, accurate and efficient in collecting, analyzing, and packaging data into strategic themes of action and interaction. This assembled multidimensional assessment is readily synthesized and packaged into a form and format that has wide applicability and meaning for those who are the intended audiences.

Most important, the meta-leader is able to get people on board by helping them make sense of widely cast and disparate information, putting it into a coherent message that serves to unite the people whom the meta-leader must recruit as followers. In this way, it is both the persona and the perspective of the meta-leader that engages people in the message and direction of the leadership agenda. It is our contention that the potential meta-leader can be identified, trained, and institutionalized, as demonstrated by the work of the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative, a joint program of the Harvard School of Public Health and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

CONCLUSION: META-LEADERSHIP AND NATIONAL EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS STRATEGY

What are the personal and professional qualities necessary to achieve the model of system-based leadership introduced here? Meta-leaders with emergency preparedness responsibilities are able not only to effectively span

organizations and weave important connections amongst them. Just as important, meta-leaders are able to incorporate this tone of critical thinking and perspective and, with it, to deepen the understanding and work of national preparedness. They have the courage,³⁶ curiosity,³⁷ and imagination to explore the scope of what could befall the country. They contribute their organizational sensibilities,³⁸ power of persuasion, and conflict and crisis management³⁹ to generate traction for their thinking. And as leaders, they have the emotional intelligence,⁴⁰ persistence, and belief in their purpose as meta-leaders to craft strategy and actions appropriate to what faces the country.

In the face of the nuclear proliferation threat, and with more potent and mobile biological, chemical, and radiological weapons available to international terrorist organizations, the United States and other targeted Western countries are coming to grips with the overwhelming task of preparing vast populations to withstand a broad spectrum of both manmade and naturally occurring risks. Since it may be impossible to fully and reliably deter such threats, and since it would be infeasible to assemble all assets to respond fully to every threat in every locale, it is necessary to build the capacity for quick coordination of resources in order to leverage the best possible response and recovery operation.

Certainly, the evidence from the Katrina operation verifies that communication and coordination shortfalls do affect morbidity and mortality outcomes. Acknowledging the direct link among response capacity, government credibility, and population impact, the bureaucratic changes required for effective national preparedness—chief among them the National Response Plan and the National Incident Management System—and their generated impact with time will be institutionalized into effective systems and organizations that will routinely achieve a level of surveillance and readiness appropriate to current risks. This process is and will continue to be an evolving process. In the meantime, there is a need for leaders to craft a new brand of agile cross-organizational linkage in the preparedness period that itself would serve as an important shield and source of security during a crisis. Meta-leaders have much to offer this process, and their work and contributions are worthy now of recognition and encouragement, combined with further investigation and understanding.

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