THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT

Crisis management teams bring together people from different institutional cultures. Managing their inevitable conflicts can be a leader's toughest challenge.

by Herman B. "Dutch" Leonard and Arnold M. Howitt

ORDINARY HOUSE FIRES RARELY RECEIVE FRONT-PAGE treatment. House fires can be traumatic and sometimes lethal to those directly involved, but they are nonetheless largely routine to those fighting them. Though no two fires are exactly alike, first responders have developed a repertoire of fire-fighting routines that are adaptable to nearly every contingency they are likely to encounter within an ordinary house fire situation. These circumstances require a speedy response by trained operators, but do not demand the involvement of political authorities or of specialists in disaster relief. There's no need to call in the mayor or the Federal Emergency Management Agency. A house fire is a *routine* emergency.

Suppose, though, that a wildland fire fanned by high winds descends from a mountainside to threaten hundreds of residences in a bedroom community. With so many lives and so much property at risk, decisions must be made about priorities and tradeoffs. Which neighborhoods are protected first, and which cannot be saved? The situation thus takes on political dimensions that are beyond the expertise and authority of the firefighters. Such a conflagration has grown beyond being a routine emergency – it has become *a crisis.*

The difference is not just one of scale but also of kind. A crisis is *sui generis,* and no suitable prescribed response to it can be found in the standard emergency-response repertoire. Because of its novelty, scale, and complexity, successfully handling a cri-

sis will generally require the involvement of a range of managers and decision-makers—not just **operating managers**, but **political leaders** and **technical specialists** as well.

What happens when these three types of actors interact under the stress of a true crisis? Thrown together, often for the first time, in the middle of uncertain, poorly understood, rapidly evolving situations, they must improvise and then direct complex and often unplanned and unpracticed new activities. How will they perform? Will they take advantage of the divergent backgrounds, skills, expertise, and inclinations of their members and successfully manage the conflicts and frictions that will inevitably arise? Or will they break down into infighting, inadequate communication, and ineffectiveness? In what follows, we attempt to answer those questions by examining cases of both effective and ineffective crisis response, and we draw from those cases some lessons for crisis-management teams—and, in particular, for their leaders.

PLAYERS AND ROLES

Crisis-management teams tend to be made up of three kinds of players. The members of the three groups generally have different backgrounds, training, skills, mindsets, and mental models—different ways of looking at the world and processing challenges. Their outlooks shaped by training and experience, they have divergent views about priorities, the pace at which the situation needs to be assessed and responded to, and the importance and value of different forms of expertise. Each often finds the other groups' inclinations at best baffling and at worst intensely frustrating, and they may find it very difficult to form a positive basis for collaboration, especially while under high stress.

The Politicians The most senior people present during a crisis are generally political officials—elected officials, in most cases. They hold most of the objective authority and will be asked to make or affirm most of the most important decisions. Elected political officials and their senior political staff members tend to treat every situation as unique. Experienced improvisers, they vary widely in their inclinations to intervene. Some resist the impulse toward immediate action, preferring to see how events are playing out before committing to one course of action or another. Others may feel an intense pressure to act, to be seen taking charge and exercising leadership.

Whatever their inclinations toward action, the politicians are often out of phase with their operational commanders. They may prefer more immediate action than their commanders are ready to mobilize, or they may want to accumulate additional alternatives when their operational commanders want authorization to proceed immediately. In either case, political leaders generally (and logically) give priority to political considerations. They will have to deal with the political fallout, so they will tend to seek information about consequences to different groups and may weigh outcomes differently than other participants. When they do decide that action is required, they are familiar and comfortable with making judgments in the absence of complete data.

The Analysts Political leaders are often accompanied by lower-level appointed officials or substantive experts whose role is mainly to advise and give decision support. They are sometimes joined by additional experts called in because of their specific substantive knowledge of the situation. These analysts help structure decisions, develop options, and assess facts and likely consequences of the various alternatives under consideration. This group may be sensitive to political concerns, but their greater substantive expertise will generally incline them to focus on the technical facts of the situation and to try to predict its evolution and consequences. They often find the novelty of a crisis situation to be particularly challenging. Since, by its nature, novelty implies that prior experience and analysis may not be completely reliable guides, they may be reluctant to act or decide quickly. While they understand the urgency of the situation, they are hesitant to choose from only a short list of quickly conceived options. They tend to resist early commitment, preferring to maintain some degree of operational flexibility while they gather more data, seek additional options, and more thoroughly consider potential consequences.

The Operational Commanders Joining the political officials and the substantive experts—and often the first actually to arrive on the scene—is a third cadre: the senior operational commanders of the response units involved. In domestic crises these often include police, fire, public health, and medical services. In national security crises, military, intelligence agency, and federal law enforcement commanders are usually brought into the team.

Tactical commanders tend to feel the pressure of time. Their experience and training strongly reinforce the belief that crises, like emergencies, require "prompt and decisive action" (a culturally revealing phrase often invoked at the FBI). They are acutely aware that lives hang in the balance, and they want to assess, plan, and begin execution as quickly as they can. Once they have developed a grasp of the essential features of a problem, they will move quickly to formulate options, create a general plan, and then begin to issue operational orders.

They believe in policies—and their policies about what to do and how to do it have often been worked out and confirmed in prior emergencies. The policies, deeply embedded through training, routines, and daily practice, are designed to allow a nimble, adaptive response to individual situations by customizing the available routines. The details of how the general routine will be applied are variable, and a good deal of training and practice goes into developing the skills of customization. The general routine, however, is emphatically not regarded as variable—it is a durable framework within which the variations required to address a specific event can take place.

Operational commanders (and the organizations they command) tend to be quite resistant to policy changes at any time—and especially resistant to policy changes under stress in crisis conditions. Their experience teaches them that unrehearsed and poorly executed routines are actively dangerous. New general routines will, by definition, not have been carefully worked out and tested for hidden flaws, and they may bristle with unforeseen dangers that experience hasn't had a chance to expose.

As a general rule, we can say that operational commanders are practiced and adept at rapid *tactical* innovation—at customizing and adapting their basic approaches to the problem at hand. Through long experience, they are skilled at doing so under stress. They are much less inclined toward sudden *policy* or *strategy* changes. They will turn conservative and unyielding when faced with a suggestion to deploy their people in a novel way or combine forces with some other, unfamiliar organization or apply one step of a routine but suspend other steps. To their way of thinking, deviations from routine

produce danger and unexpected outcomes—unexpected outcomes that are likely to be sharply negative.

SOME ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

The interactions between the politicians, analysts, and operators add a significant element of uncertainty to an already ambiguous and volatile situation. Given the divergent backgrounds, priorities, and problem-solving styles of the three groups and their leaders, conflict is all but inevitable in a sustained crisis. If that conflict is carefully managed and contained, it can actually improve the performance of the crisis management team by forcing leaders to consider options that they wouldn't consider under more normal circumstances. Left unaddressed, however, interparty conflict can lead to communications breakdowns, suboptimal decision-making, and disastrous outcomes, as in the first case we consider—and very nearly in the second case as well.

Philadelphia MOVE confrontation, May 13, 1985 Entrenched animosities can cripple a crisis management team. Philadelphia Mayor Wilson Goode had been feuding with his senior police and fire officials for years before a longstanding, episodically violent confrontation between members of the radical MOVE organization and Philadelphia public safety officials reached a flashpoint in May 1985. In an attempt to end an armed standoff at MOVE's headquarters—actually a home in a residential neighborhood—police developed (and the Mayor

intense that it cannot be effectively fought. Megafires occurred in Idaho and Montana in 1988 (the infamous "Yellowstone fires"), in Montana in 2000, in Oregon in 2002, and in the Southern California area in 2003.

Confronted by a megafire, operational commanders perform a sort of triage, implicitly or explicitly shifting their objectives from containment of the fire—a virtual impossibility—to the limited protection of specific highly valued assets, such as residences in a defensible area or culturally significant sites. Other areas will be more or less explicitly sacrificed as indefensible.

The operational imperatives of a megafire, however, are in sharp conflict with the priorities of political leaders. Politicians, mobilized by constituents anxious to protect their families and homes, find such sacrifices hard to accept and insist on different responses. Often they offer operational commanders additional resources, with the expectation that those additional resources will be used to try to contain the fire and seek to defend any and all threatened property. In San Diego in 2003, political officials offered firefighting commanders the services of 6,000 Navy and Marine Corps personnel stationed in the vicinity of the fires. Deploying 6,000 untrained, energetic amateurs onto the firelines, however, would have been an invitation to catastrophe. Firefighting officials in charge of the Southern California fires politely declined the politicians' offer of help, but their fire-fighting abilities were hardly aided by the distraction of having to engage political officials in operational discussions.

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approved) a plan to storm the building. When their initial approaches failed—in an unexpectedly intense hail of gunfire from within the fortified bunker—they moved quickly to a previously developed alternate plan (about which the Mayor had not been informed in advance) to drop an explosive device on the roof to blow a hole in the structure. Police would then charge through the hole to subdue those inside.

Goode was consulted about this risky variation from the originally approved plan only about twenty minutes before the device was dropped. He gave his concurrence, and the subsequent explosion started a fire. Without consulting the mayor, officials on the scene decided not to fight the blaze immediately, hoping that it would cause the roof to collapse and allow them to enter. When informed about the fire, Goode ordered it fought, but this order came too late. The fire burned out of control, eventually consuming an entire city block consisting of about 60 dwellings. Six adults and five children trapped in the MOVE house died in the fire.

Megafires: Montana 1988, Montana 2000, Oregon 2002, Southern California 2003 Even when operational and political leaders are not locked in an adversarial relationship, their differing priorities can lead to conflict and muddle. Consider recent megafires in the western U.S.

Conditions of extended and extreme drought in wildland areas can result in a "megafire"—a widespread conflagration so

The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 16-29, 1962 When the Soviet Union's secret construction of nuclear-capable missile launch sites in Cuba was discovered by U.S. surveillance in October 1962, President Kennedy formed a working group, called the ExComm, to develop options and recommend courses of action. It consisted of political advisers, substantive experts, and operational commanders. Early ExComm meetings were characterized by strong pressure from the operational commanders to choose quickly among a small number of options, all involving the use of military force. The military commanders felt the pressure of time; their intelligence sources reported to them that the missiles were not yet operational but would be soon, and that there were not yet any other operational Soviet nuclear weapons in Cuba. (This intelligence turned out to be wrong. The Soviets, scholars have recently learned, already had tactical nuclear weapons on the island and had orders to use them in case of a U.S. invasion.) They believed they had the element of tactical surprise on their side, but not for long. The Soviets would soon figure out that the Americans had discovered the missiles. The military's chance to strike without warning was evaporating—and as a consequence, they felt great urgency to act forcefully, decisively, and quickly. In turn, they pressured the President to authorize one of several rapidly developed plans for direct military intervention, each adapting a standard form of military action.

Although many members of the ExComm team found the military leaders' arguments persuasive, the President himself demurred. In the early days of the crisis, against the recommendations of his military advisors, he consistently sought to widen the available decision space. The President found all of the military options unattractive. He felt the pressure of time, but not as acutely as his operational commanders did. He repeatedly asked ExComm members to develop more options without accepting or rejecting the options he had been given already. The President actively kept a series of possible options under analysis, accumulating alternatives and hesitating to commit to a course of action that would irrevocably reduce his available options.

Kennedy and his closest political confidants also focused on some aspects of the proposed options that others had largely overlooked. In a move that was significant both politically and operationally, the President shifted the definition of the conflict by insisting that the adversary was the Soviet Union and not, as some of the options and discussion implicitly assumed, Cuba. Attorney General Robert Kennedy asked how people, now and in the future, would interpret what could be characterized as a "sneak attack" on Soviet bases in Cuba.

The President and Attorney General had called attention to the long-term political and diplomatic impacts of military action—something that the generals themselves were less likely to focus on. By reframing both the adversary and the interpretation of a surprise attack, the political leaders significantly shifted participants' thinking about the advisability of military intervention.

For their part, the substantive experts wanted more data and more analysis before reaching a decision. To the frustration of the operational commanders, they insisted on going over and over again the various options and their possible consequences. They sought additional expert guidance—about how Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev might react, about how the military options would play out. They continually elaborated scenarios, playing "what if?" ("If we do X, they will do Y. What will we then do? If we do that, what will they then do?")

Finally, once a general course of action—a naval blockade (carefully labeled a "quarantine" for political and diplomatic reasons) coupled with intense back-channel diplomacy—had been chosen, politicians and their advisers tried to customize how it would be carried out. Political participants wanted to know if they could change some of the standard procedures for the blockade. The Chief of Naval Operations, George W. Anderson, Jr., was reportedly horrified by the thought that inexperienced, high-ranking amateurs, far removed from the operational setting, would order on-site personnel to follow untested approaches pregnant with unintended consequences. He curtly informed his superiors that the Navy already knew how to operate a blockade. In the event, however, he was overruled. On orders from the President and the Secretary of Defense, some of the blockade procedures were indeed modified.

In the end, the ExComm team managed to integrate the disparate views and inclinations of its members effectively. They avoided what we now know would have been the catastrophic consequences of nuclear confrontation if the U.S. had intervened mil-

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itarily in Cuba. Part of what helped the group overcome the difficulties stemming from its internal conflicts and differing perspectives were the stakes involved—it was not lost on anyone that literally millions of lives hung in the balance. It was also crucial that team members—and especially the team leader—were able to recognize, respect, and value the different forms of contribution and expertise required to craft an effective response to such a novel challenge.

Baltimore CSX Tunnel Fire, July 2001 When a CSX train carrying hazardous chemicals derailed in a tunnel underneath Baltimore's central district and caught fire, first responders initially had difficulty assessing the scope, scale, and severity of the crisis. It was clear, though, that it had a potentially enormous footprint. The city center stretched over several square miles, and tens of thousands of people could have been affected by toxic smoke, explosion, or collapsing buildings. The political considerations were also alarming: cordoning off or evacuating the city center would have caused widespread fear, the possibility of panic, and enormous disruption to traffic and commerce. Faced with a dilemma, Mayor Martin O'Malley consciously subordinated his political priorities to what he saw as first-order public safety concerns. He focused, he said later, on being "the best deputy the fire chief ever had." Operational leaders, in turn, sought and processed more information about the train cargo and its potential for destructive outcomes before triggering emergency responses. What might have been a collision was resolved, at least in the early hours of the event, by a decision to let operational considerations, informed by data about the nature of the fire, dominate.

Terrorist attacks on the United States, September 11, 2001 In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, a single pattern

In 1962, as his generals pressed him to take immediate military action to knock out Cuba's nuclear threat, President John F. Kennedy sought to widen the decision space available to him.

emerged. In New York, at the Pentagon, and at the White House, leaders of different types quickly established a division of labor. The most senior political officials worked principally on political matters—largely, formulating and communicating political messages—while operational officials took the lead on organizing the rescue and recovery efforts.

In New York, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani relied heavily on his experienced Office of Emergency Management to plan, coordinate, and direct physical operations. He concentrated on communications—encouraging rescue workers, publicly grieving and empathizing with the victims and their families, demonstrating calm and determination in the midst of terrible trauma, publicly modeling coping skills, and generally assisting all who saw him in psychologically processing the unfolding events. His performance was political in the best sense of the term. In the first days and hours after the attacks, New Yorkers—and the nation—turned to him more than to any other public official for guidance, interpretation, and as a model for feeling emotion but not being incapacitated by it.

At the White House, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice deliberately stepped back from chairing the committee of officials in the security, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies that were assessing the situation and directing operational responses. Richard Clarke, Special Assistant to the President for Counterterrorism, instead chaired the committee. Clarke was a career (that is, non-political) official who had overseen the construction of much of the nation's counterterrorism response apparatus and knew the system better than anyone. Rice, meanwhile, joined Vice President Cheney in a secure bunker. Maintaining an open telephone line to Clarke, they began work on a set of distinctly political issues.

The federal response, from its earliest moments, was marked by the separation of the political and operational levels, both physically and functionally. Each group quickly focused on different work. Clarke directed actions that included grounding all non-military air traffic, closing the borders, and closing all ports to traffic either in or out. Decisions with the deepest potential political ramifications—for example, whether military aircraft could shoot down domestic airliners that were deemed to constitute a threat—were referred to the political group.

The political group, meanwhile, focused on a different set of questions. When should President Bush return to Washington? What should he say? What message should be communicated to the public, to allies, to foes? What contacts should be made with allies, and through what channels? In the days that followed, as the immediate technical demands of rescue and recovery response became reasonably manageable, the political group increasingly focused on public and diplomatic communications and policy guidance, seeking to define the nature of the attacks (acts of war), specifying the enemy (worldwide terrorism, starting with but not limited to al Qaeda), and mobilizing a coalition of nations to address terrorism as an international challenge.

Not every decision taken by either group during the crisis was necessarily optimal. But the working division of labor between political and operational groups in each location seems to have helped both to focus more effectively on their respective tasks.

MANAGING THE INEVITABLE CONFLICTS

In any major crisis, there are three kinds of work to be done. Physical, technical, and operational work is generally best understood, planned in detail, and executed by operational commanders. Cognitive work—understanding the larger picture, seeing the stakes and implications, structuring decisions and providing analytical decision support—is often best attended to by substantive experts and analysts. Political work—balancing competing values, making crucial decisions about strategy, providing interpretation and perspective, asking for sacrifices, legitimating the choices made, organizing support for the actions taken, and helping the public to process and cope emotionally with the events—lies in the realm of politicians.

There is always potential for conflict among the three groups when they're thrown together by a crisis under emotional and physical stress. In instances such as the MOVE confrontation in Philadelphia, these conflicts seriously degrade decision-making and contribute to catastrophe. In others, the conflicts cause tensions that create distractions and additional stress for those involved, even if they are eventually successfully resolved (as they were in the Southern California megafires). But in other cases—the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Baltimore tunnel fire, and both New York and Washington in the wake of 9/11—people with different skills and inclinations are able to divide the work and collaborate productively.

The events themselves provide one important force for collaboration—in crises, people generally seem more willing to

work for the good of the whole. But good intentions are not themselves enough. People with different inclinations are not necessarily looking for conflict, but their different assumptions and points of view may nonetheless divide them.

One form of overcoming implicit or explicit conflicts is illustrated by the Baltimore tunnel fire, where the mayor decided that the operational matters trumped political considerations. That may work in the short run for intense life-safety crises, but in longer-running and more complex matters such as the Cuban missile crisis or megafires, the conflicts among competing values can become acute, requiring a political resolution, because the clash of values is an intrinsically political matter.

Another model for managing the potential for conflict is suggested by Condoleezza Rice's stepping back from the operational crisis management team in the White House on September 11. She consciously separated the cognitive and operational work, on one hand, from the political processing, on the other. Likewise, the Office of Emergency Management's coordination of the technical response in New York City freed the mayor to undertake crucial political communications work. That separation of roles was absent during the Southern California megafire, resulting in unnecessary and unproductive tensions and distraction.

The separation of political and operational matters can never be perfect or complete. Moreover, it is important that both the political and the operational components of crisis decision and management systems incorporate the insights of technical and substantive specialists, who are likely to note the ways in which the novel elements of the crisis may require innovative operational and political approaches.

The shoot-down order for domestic aircraft on 9/11, for example, was an operational matter, but it had such important implications that it had to be processed by the highest political officials. Once taken, though, the political decision raised a host of operational questions: In what circumstances would civilian aircraft be shot down? On what evidence? With what protocols? After what attempts to communicate with the aircraft? After what other alternatives had been tried and exhausted? In short, how, exactly, was the policy to be implemented? Working out such details is an important part of determining exactly what the policy actually means. In a crisis, setting new policies requires rapid improvisation.

This seems a promising direction for further work in engineering crisis response systems and in managing cultural collisions in the midst of crises. Where crises primarily require an operational response, the detailed design and direction of that response should be largely under the direction of operational commanders. When the operational choices have significant political ramifications—and especially when they involve decisions that bring important values into conflict—it falls to the politicians to make the decisions, explain them, and rally the support necessary to sustain them.

Most crises in the United States will probably involve multiple jurisdictions. A major disaster might involve federal, state, county, and city officials—and might easily involve officials from multiple states, counties, and/or cities. The fire at the Pentagon on 9/11 offers a good illustration. The attack was on the grounds of a federal facility (the nation's military headquarters) located across the river from Washington in Arlington, Virginia. The response initially involved civilian and military Defense Department officials and Arlington County officials, but rapidly came to include federal law enforcement officials, the Washington, D.C. fire department, and many other agencies. The agencies represented at the site stand in different jurisdictional hierarchies, and none has authority over the others. Establishing effective operational command in such a situation is difficult and not always successful. In this case, all major responding agencies save one, the Washington, D.C. fire department, accepted the command of the Arlington County Assistant Fire Chief, James Schwartz, as incident commander.

No uniformly applied mechanism or policy exists for quickly resolving such disputes on-site—though the development of the National Incident Management System may be a useful step in that direction. More worrisome, there is no corresponding mechanism for forming a nexus of coordinated political decision-making, communication, and action during a large-scale disaster. Developing—and practicing—a flexible, workable protocol for establishing a form of unified political command among multiple political jurisdictions that have no previously defined hierarchical structure should be a high priority for those seeking to make responses to future crisis situations more effective.

In the absence of such a mechanism, what can be done in advance and in the moment to mitigate the potential clash of cultures at the heart of the crisis response team?

Perhaps the single most important form of prior preparation would be to practice multi-jurisdictional, multi-level responses. Crises bring together disparate groups of people because different approaches are needed. The challenge is for them to collaborate effectively when a crisis throws them together suddenly. Prior practice—through scenario planning, tabletop exercises, or physical drills—can build the mutually respectful relationships that enable each group to contribute its expertise without driving the others to distraction.

In the midst of a crisis, the critical challenge is for participants to remember that everyone has a distinct role to play and to stay reasonably within their respective domains. As in Southern California, political leaders risk disaster when they intervene at too low a level in operational decisions. As in Philadelphia, operational commanders place the response at risk when they fail to perceive the political consequences of their actions and fail to involve political leaders in decision-making. Analysts can be helpful when they can structure decisions and options for consideration and supply information about likely consequences. When they give free rein to their instincts to seek more data, however, they can be a roadblock to timely decision-making.

Extending somewhat the logic of a recent RAND study, effective response in a crisis can be defined as a good enough decision, made soon enough to matter, communicated well enough to be understood, carried out well enough to work. Effective management of the three cultures present at the crisis management table can help get the choices framed, the decisions reached, the relevant people told, and the actions executed. Failure to work in advance and in the moment on helping these cultures interact in a positive way can lead to a clash of cultures that will degrade the effectiveness of the response—with potentially disastrous results. ✦

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