Fear and Loathing on the Front Lines: A Look at Disaster from the First-Responder Perspective

The Regenhard Center for Emergency Response Studies
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Contemporary Accounts of Disaster

• Social construction (Dynes & Rodriquez 2007)
  – First-responders: victims or villains?
  – Citizens: portrayals often emphasize actions that seem irrational, opportunistic, or even criminal

• Need for consistent definitions and clarity …
  – Distinction between crises and disasters (and possibly even catastrophes) – change is the common element
  – Appreciation of the policy-making and leadership roles of boundary actors – those who make and implement policy
Leadership

Heifetz (1992) distinguishes between two types of change that require leadership

– Technical change
– Adaptive change
Objectives

• Contextualize disasters from first-responder perspective
• Advance emergency management as leadership work
• Improve structures, systems, and processes
• Advocate public policy that reflects experience
Approach

• Review the literature
  – Crisis and disaster management generally
  – Public sector leadership and decision-making

• Propose a way forward
  – Continued use of narrative and case studies, but
  – Grounded in a theory of action research
A growing body of work on disasters, particularly from social science and natural hazards perspectives

- Public administration: Distinctions between crises and disasters (Schneider 2008)
- Organizational theory: High-reliability organizations (Weick & Sutcliffe 2001; Bigley & Roberts 2001; cf. Perrow 1996)
- Natural hazards: Vulnerability often result from human decisions (Mileti 1999; Pelling 2003)
Little or none of it focuses on first-responders’ actions

- PTSD/CISD (Roberts & Everly 2006; Everly & Boyle 1999; Paton & Flin 1999; Mitchell & Dyregrov 1993)
- RPD & ICS (Flin & Arbuthnot 2002; Bigley & Roberts 2001; Klein 1999; Flin 1996)
- Sensemaking (Weick 1993)
- Communication at WTC during 9/11 (Dearstyne 2007)
- Heroic action of USCG during Katrina (Flynn 2007)
Some Additional Sources

Human error

– Active versus latent error (Reason 1990)
– Intention & action (Senders & Moray 1992)
  • Slips
  • Mistakes
  • Memory errors
– Skill-, rule- & knowledge-based (Rasmussen 1981)
– Causes (Dörner 1989)
  • Thinking in linear time series (cf. exponential or logarithmic)
  • Thinking in simple cause-effect relationships vs complex networks
  • Tunnel vision vs “thematic vagabonding”
Some Additional Sources

Group decision problems

– Groupthink (Janis 1982)
– Bureaucratization (Dunn 2007)
– Institutional inertia and path-dependence
Some Additional Issues

• Resilience and reliability
  – Engineering resilience
  – Ecological resilience

• Reform/restructuring/renewal/rationalization
  – Structural
  – Strategic
  – Systemic (regime change)
Two contrasting views …

– Focusing events bring needed attention to longstanding problems and accelerate policy-level adaptations (Birkland 2006/1996)

– Political involvement, public interest competition, and powerplays delay recovery (Picou & Marshall 2006)
Leadership

• Organizational/group perspectives
  – Private sector is dominant source of models (Van Wart 2003)
  – Theories have reflected historical conditions (Van Wart 2003)
  – Contemporary principles of public sector leadership emphasize the moral dimension and democratic values (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; Denhardt & Campbell 2006)

• Individual Perspectives
  – Street-level bureaucrats (Prottas 1978; Lipsky 1980)
  – Street-level leadership (Vinzant & Crothers 1998)
Public Sector Crisis Leadership

• Hillyard (2000) suggests that the organizational structure should be matched to crisis characteristics
  – Crisis dimensions
  – Network characteristics

• Boin & ‘t Hart (2003) argue that reform leadership and crisis response differ in their requirements
  – Both involve change
  – But one involves adaptation, the other requires technical competence and decisive action
A Way Forward?

• Case studies
  – Tendency toward voyeurism
  – Need to improve the exploratory and explanatory dimensions
    • Attention to first-person narratives
    • Focus on both what is and is not said
    • Interview boundary actors

• Grounded theory
  – Use case studies to develop a theory of action
  – Based on loop-learning (levels of reform)
Grounded Theory of Action

- Anticipation
- Access
- Attention
- Assessment
- Action
- Adaptation
Loop Learning

• Organizational Learning (Argyris & Schön 1978)
  – Zero-loop (tool or technology)
  – Single-loop (task)
  – Double-loop (system)

• Societal Learning (Schön 1973)
  – Triple-loop (society)

• Reflective Practice (Schön 1984)
## A Proposed Starting Point

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**Diagram:**

- **Process Dimension**
- **Outcome Dimension**