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Leadership in Crises

Lessons learned from the front lines and the importance of war gaming

From the battlefield to the boardroom, unforeseen crises have become more common, causing larger, more disastrous and unprepared for impacts.

Strong leadership has helped militaries, governments, and other organizations manage the responses to and recoveries from these crises.

But across bureaucratic boundaries and institutional seams, all this hard-earned experience has also produced one valuable insight: rehearsing and assessing *before* a crisis can lead to greater success in responding and recovering *afterward*, even providing key learning points that might help to prevent the *next* crisis.

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A premium on crisis leadership

Growing complexity, shrinking predictability

Advances in science and technology provide new tools that empower organizations to gather information and then process it to help their leaders anticipate and manage strategic risks. These same advances, however, also bring about the ability to mitigate the protections of geography, alter the sense of individual and group identity, and ferry both customers and competitors right to your virtual doorstep. Economic, political, and societal change is dramatic. A precariously richer, highly interconnected, radically fast-paced, and increasingly multipolar world struggles to find stability. "Spiky" bouts of globalization wreak havoc on poorer places[1]. Systemic institutions, including the nation-state itself, are being threatened by a host of serious challenges to their viability.

All these factors and more are combining in new ways to create "novel" disruptions as well as enhance the disastrous effects of the more "routine" crises. If there were a global scoreboard that indicated how governments, corporations, and other organizations are faring in this dynamic and uncertain world, catastrophic events like pandemics, natural disasters, cyber-attacks, and insider malevolence are definitely in the lead.

As complexity grows, predictability shrinks. Increasingly complex situations—what some refer to as 'wicked problems'—become inherently more unstable and, more often than not, defy simple fixes. Such growing uncertainties, as well as the increasing volatility and speed of events, create a greater reliance on agile leadership. Leaders need more sophisticated and rigorous methods for identifying, analyzing, and exploring risks to successfully act on the opportunity stemming from the many types of crises they will face.

"In the business of war fighting, a war game provides the Commander the opportunity to challenge assumptions and learn who the "go to" folks are in crises. This transitions from the battlefield to the boardroom...one leader saves lives, the other shareholder value."

Lieutenant General John F. Sattler, USMC (ret)

With a premium on future leadership, what are some of the characteristics of effective crisis management in the 21st Century? Are there any commonalties among contemporary successful crisis leaders? How do those leaders organize for, and think through, each crisis successfully?

How can today's leadership learn from those who have experienced crisis? The following stories from the front lines briefly examine real instances of leadership during crises, highlight insights to improve future crisis management, and bring understanding in how to exercise those characteristics of crisis leadership in war games and simulations.

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[1] "The World Is Spiky", *The Atlantic*, 2006

Dealing with crises
Stories from the front lines

Case study

Lieutenant General John F. Sattler, United States Marine Corps (Retired)

On September 11th, 2001, then-Major General John Sattler was commanding the 16,000 Marines and Sailors of the Second Marine Division. The global order changed dramatically that day. Upon hearing President Bush speak about the event, the General recognized the Nation would soon shift to a wartime footing. The mission of his Division was to "seek out, close with, and destroy the enemy through fire and maneuver." As Marines and Sailors moved into Afghanistan with the initial surge of forces, each member of the Division took training a little more seriously; each man and woman was convinced that training for their impending mission was paramount.

One year later, as the president started to move forces forward in preparation of the invasion of Iraq, the Second Marine Division was primed to be part of the invasion force. Knowing they would face an unfamiliar battlefield with untested technology, the Division joined together with other units to conduct a highly complex, challenging war game. In addition to the myriad pieces of data pertaining to geography, enemy order of battle, weather patterns, and other factors, the collective brainpower of leadership and division personnel injected an element of subjectivity into the war game: personal opinions and assumptions. These included thoughts on where forces would be located, where and when known regional actors would participate, how many and what types of "unknowns" would exist, and how the Division's activity would fit into the larger master plan for Iraq.

After two iterations of war games, and having lived in austere conditions for several months with a degree of sleep deprivation settling in, the combined group acknowledged they would benefit from additional, perhaps external, review to help give their plan more refinement. General Sattler was in the process of sifting through the after action report from this war game when a messenger arrived with a note to call Washington. On that call, he learned that even after all the previous weeks of planning, the Second Marine Division had been tasked to form a Combined Joint Task Force over the next 60 days and transition out of Afghanistan to the Horn of Africa.

General Sattler was adamant that the Division was to be part of the larger Marine force going to Iraq, but the decision to deploy his forces to the Horn of Africa was not open for debate. The group ceased their Iraq war game and immediately returned from the field. They commenced planning their new mission, but with the rigor of impending field engagement removed from the planning, the team had lost the enthusiasm they previously had when conducting the "going to combat" war game. This diminished the group's ability to engage in the lively debate, discourse, and creative input that typically precedes an operation. Deciding that the purpose of the group heading to Africa and what was expected of them was already clear, General Sattler cancelled the war game that would have analyzed the mission and designed the force to be taken forward based on preexisting training and assumptions. The division command transitioned to execution mode.

As a result of this decision, the Division formed a force structure geared toward operations in one theater, but sailed to the horn of Africa for a different mission with different threats and challenges. Over the course of the following 90 days, the division staff found that while their troops were motivated, they were not adequately prepared to encounter the mission they actually faced on the ground. This mission was vastly different from the previous one they had trained to and rehearsed over several months in their war game. With the benefit of hindsight, the planning team performed a thorough mission analysis (with General Sattler providing constructive guidance and intent) and restructured their forces. General Sattler took away one primary lesson from the experience: there is a time when a leader must be decisive and rely on his or her prior knowledge, but that leader should also strive to find time for thorough planning and a well-constructed war game. This appetite for the "Best Collective" decision saved lives later in his career in Iraq...and again during his time as Director for Strategic Plans and Policy for the Joint Chiefs.

Relation to war gaming

An experienced strategic planner, General Sattler understood the value of war gaming in exploring risks and anticipating threats. Given his initial deployment orders, he used war games as the foundation for a structured approach to understand the signals and threat indicators his team would face on the ground. After the change in course, however, a renewed war game would have tested General Sattler's assumptions, exposed gaps and seams in the plan, and clearly highlighted the disconnect between the force trained and equipped for combat operations, and one more suited for the range of lower intensity operations expected in the Horn of Africa. Had he provided constructive guidance and intent and empowered his team, the group would have "gotten it right" from the start.

War gaming provides a methodology for probing and assessing crisis response capabilities. By immersing a diverse group of stakeholders in a realistic crisis scenario, biases and assumptions can be challenged; existing plans and capabilities can be explored for gaps and vulnerabilities; and new and innovative ideas can be stress-tested without the expenditure of real-world capital. The completeness and flexibility of existing plans, policies, and procedures to take into account the range of potential disruptive events the organization is trying to prevent can be evaluated. These and other aspects are just some of the many questions war games can answer in order to streamline crisis response and recovery. A properly designed and thought-through war game could have enhanced everyone's knowledge of the geographic area they were heading to and the complexities of the joint, interagency, and multinational environment.

In late 2002, *The Economist* magazine declared that the world's worst place in 2003 would be Liberia.[2] Indeed, by the midpoint of that year, two ferocious rebel armies closed in on Liberia's capital city of Monrovia and its infamous warlord President Charles Taylor. With a million fleeing Liberians crammed into Monrovia, the city came under siege. Heavy rebel assaults attempting to overrun the downtown area and indiscriminate mortar fire became the norm. Most foreigners had long evacuated except for the lightly staffed U.S. Embassy. With the populace virtually out of food and water and Taylor's bloodthirsty fighters low on ammunition, it looked like the rebels would take the fight downtown into a vulnerable sea of refugees.

"The 21st Century is characterized by more complex and chaotic situations that defy logical approaches and lead quickly to the unexpected. Strong leaders should seek every edge they can to respond to difficult situations and better anticipate the future. War gaming exposes leaders to thoughts they would not have themselves and provides a painless way to explore a broader range of scenarios."

The Honorable John Blaney
U.S. Ambassador to Liberia (Retired)

With the sounds of battle close, the sitting U.S. Ambassador John Blaney returned to Liberia from peace negotiations, knowing that without a lasting ceasefire, none of those efforts would come to fruition. Under heavy pressure to close the U.S. Embassy and evacuate, he and his staff instead quietly devised a plan to halt the building crescendo of slaughter. At a press conference on July 27th, he outlined his proposal for a ceasefire and demanded the insertion of West African peacekeepers between Taylor's forces and the rebels. President Taylor accepted the U.S. proposal, but the commander of the largest rebel army, General Cobra, was reluctant—he wanted to turn Monrovia into a sea of blood and become Liberia's next ruler.

Meanwhile, Ambassador Blaney and others continued to work hard on the prerequisite for peace—removing Charles Taylor from power and getting him out of Liberia. That would not be enough, however, to stop the two rebel armies from besieging Monrovia and turning on one another in a renewed struggle for power.

Ambassador Blaney's chosen course of action was to negotiate his way through "no man's land" and deal directly with General Cobra. Many in Washington thought the mission far too dangerous, but he had confidence they could develop a plan to cross lines and that his staff could negotiate an acceptable deal.

The surreal trip of Ambassador Blaney's tiny convoy across an open river bridge through "no man's land" was harrowing. They traversed the most hotly contested battle space of the war, with hundreds of opposing armed fighters on edge, in an eerie silence. After several such passages, and rancorous negotiating sessions with General Cobra, the rebels agreed to the proposed ceasefire and withdrawal, permitting the insertion of African peacekeepers. The agreement also made it possible to offload and deliver food and medicine to Monrovia's starving and sick.

There were many isolated firefights and other incidents thereafter, but the war was essentially over. The U.S. Embassy and its annex had been badly shot up, bombed, and sustained losses, but the flag still flew. After a number of months, United Nations peacekeepers arrived as the follow-on force and added strength to the badly outnumbered African peacekeepers. Soon thereafter, the disarmament and demobilization of the three armies began, eventually topping over 100,000 combatants.

With the support of the U.S. Senate, the ambassador and his staff devised fast-breaking projects to restart a stagnant Liberian economy and prevent the country from slipping back into war. Among those projects was a program modelled after the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s. Known informally as "The Blaney Brigades", thousands of former combatants from all sides were employed to fix the

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[2] *The Economist*, 2002,

roads and bridges they had previously destroyed and the schools and hospitals they had burnt down. Ambassador Blaney knew that without this pay, the fighters would return to pillaging and the industry of war. Finally, the ambassador insisted (against opposition on both sides of the Atlantic) that a free and fair election take place in 2005. The outcome was the victory of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the first democratically elected female President in the history of Africa.

Over the next decade, Liberia recovered, with strong GDP growth and progress on virtually all social metrics. Tragically, in 2014, the mostly deadly Ebola outbreak in history hit Liberia and West Africa hard. Faced with the epidemic, Liberia showed resilience and bravery, and with outside help, has contained the disease in Liberia. One big reason for that success was the commendable and responsible performance of the Liberian army and police force, which created the stability and security necessary to allow medical personnel to do their jobs.

Relation to war gaming

Without the time or resources for a highly structured war game, the small staff of the U.S. Embassy Monrovia did its best to think through in advance the steps they were about to take to negotiate peace. Ambassador Blaney encouraged open, critical, and horizontal analysis in a management situation that is normally hierarchical. Even passing through "no man's land" to end the war was not as outlandishly dangerous as originally perceived, because embassy staff had conceptualized a detailed and flexible risk mitigation plan. It included delegating the ability to abort the mission to the embassy's Defense Attaché, a plan which very nearly became necessary. The pre-planning also developed the concept that, once peace was secured, there must be an action plan in place to set the country on the road to recovery.

Not only should an enterprise be prepared to deal with the immediate crisis, but its leadership must constantly try to keep one eye on the horizon, scanning for the next indicator or disruptor, as well as envisioning their strategy for recovering and maintaining market position, post-crisis. A war game is an excellent vehicle for assessing immediate and future crisis response capability. In carefully scripted scenarios based on in-depth data gathering and stakeholder involvement, participants are able to explore whether or not their own enterprise is able to ensure the continuity of operations, physical security of valuable property and information, and safety of employees or staffs. By engaging in a purposely contentious simulated environment designed to evaluate and assess existing capabilities, players are able to experience first-hand if their current continuity plan includes all the right components; if there are succession plans to account for primary responders being unable to perform their assigned tasks; or if decision-makers have the right "asks" in place to help ensure they will be receiving the necessary type and pace of information to form coherent operating pictures. Strong crisis leaders use war gaming as a tool not only to model the response phase of a crisis, but also the recovery and rebuilding phases.

Case study

Lieutenant General Tom Metz, United States Army (Retired)

In August 2004, the Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) on the ground in Najaf, a moderately sized city in south central Iraq, was replaced through a normal rotation of forces. Although the challenges posed by both the enemy and the environmental factor of being located in one of the holiest cities in Shi'a Islam were expected, the new MEU found itself in an escalating battle which required additional combat power. The actions that followed in the resulting crisis situation were handled by leaders of the Multi-National Coalition (MNC) and required Lieutenant General Tom Metz to consider the national, cultural, and tactical implications of his unit's actions.

The fundamentals of war gaming were instrumental in informing the crisis management efforts to achieve and maintain dominance over the enemy. For example, because of the sensitivity of Coalition forces fighting near one of the most holy mosques in Iraq (the Imam Ali Shrine), multiple rehearsals, analyses, and assessments of the plan before the attack were imperative. The practice, vetting, and stress-testing of the tactics, techniques, and procedures for the final assault gave the Iraqi leaders confidence and placed them in a position of relative strength when negotiating the final outcome of this crisis situation.

One block from the Imam Ali Shrine, two hotels dominated the central part of Najaf. Enemy snipers in these hotels were growing more and more successful from their perches. Moving the best Coalition counter-snipers to Najaf balanced the sniper fight; but to achieve superiority, the advantages of the hotel's height had to be overcome. To demonstrate to the citizens of Najaf that the hotels could be targeted and struck with precision that would still allow safe evacuation of surrounding buildings and neighborhoods, a parking garage between the two hotels was targeted with precision-penetrating bombs. Suspecting the enemy was storing munitions in the parking garage, the group was proven right when secondary explosions occurred after attacks from close air support. By this point in the battle for Najaf, the enemy only occupied the holy Mosque in the center of the city and the two hotels in close proximity. U.S. Marines and Soldiers occupied the remainder of the city, but the enemy sniper's advantage still had to be removed.
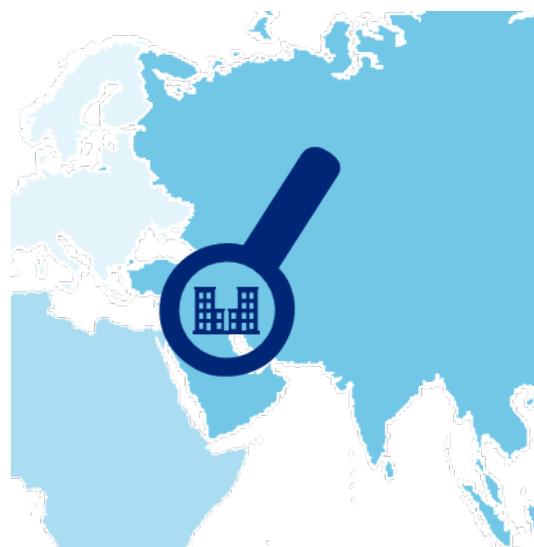
Fortunately, these hotels were in a part of Najaf which was under the control of the MNC targeting team comprised of field grade officers across multiple services and partner nation militaries. This team designed attacks of 2,000-pound precision-penetrating bombs to destroy the hotels without damage to the Imam Ali Shrine. The bombs struck the designated targets within the hotels near the holy Mosque: the first hotel struck collapsed and the second soon followed suit, falling on top of the first and away from the mosque. The progression of this attack closely resembling the well-planned and rehearsed peacetime demolition one might see on the Vegas strip retiring a well-worn casino. This success was a direct result of the amount of time the multi-national leaders dedicated to war gaming, analysis, and preparation prior to execution.

With the hotels removed, about 300 remaining enemy combatants occupied the Mosque. With snipers from across the Coalition trained on the building, they were pinned inside. No insurgent could enter or depart the shrine without being in the crosshairs of a coalition sniper. Even with these *tactical* successes, the international pressure via Iran's successful information campaign left the *strategic* situation still largely in doubt, as clamor for lifting pressure on the mosque arose.

To remove those who remained in the mosque, the MNC targeting team needed a simple plan, war gamed with detailed and disciplined preparation. The commander of one of the lead elements of the MNC was invited to the rehearsal for two reasons: first, he possessed extensive experience fighting in Iraq; second, he represented a variety of important stakeholders and it was critical to ensure these voices were heard. The intangible internal communication aspect of having two 3-star generals working

together from the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps was not lost on the younger Soldiers and Marines; more importantly, it was also not lost on the members of the Iraqi 36th Commandos and other Iraqi officials involved in the planning for the assault. Iraqi Ministers of Defense and Interior were additionally invited to observe and learn the basics of war gaming. Although the first rehearsal was a good effort, senior MNC Commanders agreed that it was not up to the established standard (to the surprise of the Iraqi leaders) and thus more assessments and rehearsals were required. Defeating 300 insurgents in one of Shia Islam's holiest shrines required a simple plan executed superbly. War gaming helped ensure the plan had taken into account as many contingencies and potential unknowns as possible, had vetted all key assumptions, and confirmed risk identification and prioritization was completed. But time was running out…

"Few organizational cultures allow for sincere, candid, and accurate feedback while training. The American military is almost unique with its simulations (live, virtual, and constructive) and the after action review process—the more open, honest, and explicit in describing both successes *and* failures the war game is, the more agility, cohesion, and sophistication of analysis are enhanced."

Lieutenant General Tom Metz, US Army (Retired)

The preparations and rehearsals for removing the enemy fighters from the shrine were complete, and the Coalition force was very confident of its future success. However, the probability of significant damage to the mosque was still high, as was the risk of "friendly fire". From a strategic communication standpoint, one of the most important considerations was the optics of tanks outside the shrine combined with American Special Forces fighting inside it, and how these scenes could be manipulated and then propagated by the enemy. It was also necessary to plan for the fallout associated with any American killed or wounded inside this holy site. The series of war games identified all of these variables and led to the eventual determination that the ideal conclusion to this standoff would be the voluntary exit of the occupants of the mosque.

Clearly communicating these factors to then-Prime Minister Allawi was based heavily upon the amount of study, analysis, and war gaming that had been done to test and demonstrate the validity and efficacy of the recommended course of action. Upon seeing the evidence, the Prime Minister engaged the enemy combatants entrenched in the mosque, offering no other options except immediate surrender and evacuation. The combatants chose that option shortly after. A focus on thorough preparation and risk-informed decision-making due to continuous and rigorous war gaming positioned the Prime Minister to win his first significant challenge.

Relation to war gaming
Leadership and decision-making in the midst of a crisis does not always allow time to stop and conduct war games; thus, leaders must allocate time *before* the crisis develops to educate and train their staff on the steps and processes of war gaming. Immersing the team in plausible experiential learning scenarios supported by simulations builds confidence in making and supporting decisions. This investment pays handsome dividends. Few militaries allow for free-thinking adversaries in war gaming because admitting the enemy might actually prevail is unacceptable ideologically and culturally. A non-constrained enemy unbounded by culture or fear or repercussions will significantly help the leader uncover faulty assumptions and identify biases that otherwise would go unnoticed. Once the culture of good war gaming is ingrained in an organization, it will benefit from the analysis of innovative and risk-reducing strategies without actual consequences or expenditure of resources. Those organizations that prepare for crises via war gaming and simulation best manage the "fog of war" in a crisis situation. The time or resources of a crisis might not allow for detailed war gaming, but personnel who are skilled in the methodology will have a cognitive advantage that is most visibly measured in the "won-loss" column. The Operation Iraqi Freedom Coalition was blessed with Soldiers and Marines who were well educated and trained in war gaming. The crisis in Najaf did not allow for additional time spent war gaming, but the challenges *during* this crisis were met because of preparations made by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps months and years *before* the crisis.

Case study

John W. Halinski, Former Deputy Administrator/Deputy Assistant Secretary, Transportation Security Administration

In the period leading up to the Christmas Day 2009 Underwear Bombing attempt, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) was following multiple threat streams focused on aviation. The majority of these involved the terrorist group Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), who had been fixated with attacking the commercial aviation sector. AQAP was emboldened by the significance of the attacks of 9/11, and thus believed that continued attacks in this domain would significantly terrorize the West by causing significant loss of life and serious economic damage.

The TSA is a component of the Department of Homeland Security, and thus is the Federal entity charged with protecting the transportation sector of the United States. On any given day, the TSA screens almost 2 million people, thousands of tons of cargo, and more than 5 million bags. This system is one part of many layers of security, both seen and unseen, for the travelling public. To accomplish its mission, TSA must coordinate with a multitude of federal, state, and local agencies, in addition to foreign nations and regulatory bodies, on a daily basis.

There are over 280 foreign airports that provide direct service to the United States from around the world. TSA does not provide screening in those locations, but they still must ensure that each access point upholds the standards that permit them to provide direct service to the United States. Recognizing that the primary threat from AQAP would most likely emanate from outside the United States, the TSA has worked continually with foreign nations to upgrade their security capabilities.

In the summer of 2009, the TSA held a series of tabletop exercises discussing a number of threat streams and scenarios to ensure that the essential requirements of a validated crisis response could be put into place quickly. They conducted these exercises with other agencies, most notably the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), and many included terrorism scenarios with three goals: first, determining when it would be necessary for the TSA and FAA to conduct a "ground stop" of all aircraft; second, what the process would be to reinitiate service based on threat conditions; and third, increasing recognition for communications capability and how to handle a worldwide threat, simultaneously.

On Christmas Day 2009, a would-be suicide bomber named Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab boarded an aircraft in Amsterdam bound for Detroit. He used a completely non-metallic explosive device which he had placed within his underwear (AQAP had conducted enough research, simulations training, and their own brand of due diligence to understand that a walk-through metal detector would not detect the device, as well as understanding the cultural constraints which would preclude truly invasive screening and profiling). He attempted to detonate the explosive once the aircraft commenced the final approach into the Detroit airport, but the trigger mechanism failed, and he was subdued by passengers on the flight. Initial reports by the media reported there were fireworks used on the flight by an unruly passenger, but after a preliminary assessment by law enforcement, TSA understood they were facing a different type of threat and therefore must react quickly to mitigate any other attempts which might be underway, both domestically as well as at any of the other approximately 280 embarkation routes.

Based on lessons learned from previous training exercises and simulations, TSA set up a crisis incident management group. This group acted immediately to ground all remaining flights from Europe, Africa, and the Middle East until further screening could be accomplished, as well as setting in motion a mitigation plan and accompanying communication plan focusing on audiences throughout the rest of the world.

The mitigation plan called for immediate full-body screens of all passengers boarding U.S.-bound flights lasting for a 72-hour period. Detailed information was also provided to airlines on certain procedures that would have to be taken for aircraft already airborne. TSA further recognized that due to the holiday period, this mitigation would have a significant impact on flight delays and operations. Knowing that these measures could only be sustained for a short duration, they developed a different mitigation strategy for this type of threat after the initial 72-hour period had expired. Finally, TSA ensured that other countries were all following these new procedures and adhering to the standards set forth.

As a result of this incident, TSA significantly changed their approach to identify "clean skin" threats, while also developing the "body scanner" X-ray technology now in use at all major U.S. airports. There were many lessons learned from this event, particularly in how to mitigate the threat; however, perhaps the most important was TSA's understanding that the successful response and recovery once the event occurred was directly proportional to the amount of time and effort given to rigorous planning and rehearsal exercises beforehand, all designed to help develop awareness and capabilities to prosecute the crisis incident effectively.

Relation to war gaming

As mentioned, TSA held a series of tabletop exercises and war games months before the events of Christmas Day 2009. As a result of these exercises, TSA recognized it had to coordinate better with other government agencies, particularly the FAA. TSA also learned that to react quickly in a crisis, they needed to develop a "ready-to-issue" series of regulations to mitigate a specific threat. TSA developed a template for these type of events that could be put into place within hours. The exercises and war gaming also identified the need to have a very thorough communications plan in place around the world. Key contacts and stakeholders needed to be identified, messaging needed to be standardized, and TSA personnel needed to be able to respond quickly to all 280+ airports that flew directly to the U.S.

"Nothing is more effective for a leader and their organization than experiencing the reality of making difficult decisions and building cohesion and team unity. War gaming provides this opportunity, but does so in a cost effective way and in the relatively safe environment of a simulation"

John Halinski
Former Deputy Administrator,
Transportation Security Administration

While the events of Christmas Day 2009 identified shortfalls in the aviation security system identifying a new threat, the reaction and quick mitigation of this threat can be attributed directly to prior planning and exercises which identified capability gaps and holes in the system. These vulnerabilities were corrected shortly after the series of simulations, and as a direct result, no aircraft was grounded for more than two hours. While initial mitigation measures were intense and not passenger friendly, they *were* put into place quickly, effectively neutralizing any additional threats. Information and intelligence was sent worldwide within a six-hour period, and no other threats were identified during this timeframe. If TSA had not been dedicated to the intellectual rigor of prior war gaming and tabletop exercises, the response time to this event could have been much longer and significantly more costly.

War gaming, as a specific tool and discipline, can greatly enhance the value of existing analysis. By creating immersive scenarios with dynamic and free-thinking adversaries with capabilities greater than prevailing biases and assumptions allow, organizations are forced to confront undesirable and unintended consequences, yielding insights that enable better preparation and anticipation of future crises and risks. As such, conducting war games as an integral part of the planning cycle can bring value to any decision maker planning to allocate large resources to a fixed and strategically vital piece of infrastructure, be they government buildings, corporate headquarters, energy pipelines or grids, or other similar high-cost, high-vulnerability projects.

The return on investment of preparation

From the previous narratives, a single coherent theme emerges: *successful crisis leadership begins with dedication to rigorous preparation and rehearsal.* These experiences also reinforce five essential principles for leaders during crises. Executives should consider incorporating these elements while leading and managing their own organizations both before and during turbulent times:

Lead decisively—Leading decisively during a crisis is paramount, but so is being able to negotiate a delicate balance: react too quickly, and a leader may act on bad information. Wait too long to receive "perfect information" and analysis paralysis may result in making no decision at all.

Continuously frame the crisis—Crisis leaders should constantly analyze the crisis and assess it, down to the weeks, hours, and minutes. Rather than holding fast to the first impression and analysis of the crisis, be flexible to new information as it comes along.

Actively communicate—Control the message by designating someone to be the single voice and to be *the* source of honest, consistent information. Keep a record of the facts that are known at each point of the process in order to respond to potential lawsuits or inquiries that may arise.

Be ready for the unexpected—Under extreme pressure, individuals may act differently than normal and the usual organizational roles may not apply to a crisis. This can further add to the unpredictability of a critical event. To counteract this, any one person should have limits on responsibility and scope, thereby avoiding the "single point of failure" element.

Drive toward actionable intelligence—When in the midst of a crisis, leadership must often navigate confusing data and intelligence. It is important, therefore, to cast a wide net, as crucial information can come from a range of sources. But those sources must be qualified, as misinformation can be as prevalent as information.

The case studies on crisis leadership covered the decision-making, guidance, and management of various organizations from the perspective of looking back and gleaning lessons learned. The underlying message, however, is how an organization can and should take steps to best position itself *before* the crisis or disruption takes place. War games are a key element of that pre-crisis or event preparation.

War games are applied analytic exercises that may differ in appearance, structure, or outcome, but all serve the common purpose of improving decision-making under uncertainty. In practice, war games bring leaders together, introduce them to scenarios that defy easy solutions—along with free-thinking third parties and competitors or adversaries, when appropriate—and provide a safe space to explore, rehearse, refine, and assess new and existing courses of action.

A war game's specific benefits will be driven by its objectives and the unique circumstances surrounding the organization; however, several common fruits are borne from almost any well-designed simulation. First, participants will emerge with a better common understanding of the problem. Second, leaders and managers will gain a greater appreciation for the decisions their peers face, and how seemingly isolated decisions can cascade up and down an organization. Third, to the extent that real-life plans or procedures can be adhered to in a war game, they will be strengthened or enhanced by the rigorous process through discovering gaps, assessing capabilities, and making necessary adjustments. Finally, war games create the opportunity to discover previously unknown risks, as well as providing the indicators and warnings of potential future ones.

Building on the principles above, the following are ways to strengthen each of those principles through a dedicated focus on the disciplined, topic-agnostic methodology of war gaming and crisis simulation:

Inject elements of reality into simulation

All four contributors conveyed they had clearly defined triggers that enabled them to identify when conflict was imminent. Knowing these triggers and the associated indicators and warnings ahead of time enabled them to better prepare for a crisis. By ensuring their war game and simulation scenarios were as accurate a reflection of the range of their real world as possible, these leaders and their organizations were far better equipped to deal with events that, while still over the horizon, have at least been defined and articulated. General Sattler references the idea that as news spread about combat operations beginning in Afghanistan, the participants in his war games were committed to taking the scenarios seriously and engaging in productive discussion. The more participants believe that what they are doing reflects a real-life scenario they might face, the more likely they are to give the exercise their full focus and energy.

Consult a diverse array of stakeholders

The more individuals and groups who are able to weigh in on a prospective course of action, the more confident leaders can be that they have considered every angle of a dynamic crisis situation. War games have the inherent ability to produce insights because they bring together a group of individuals who might not otherwise be consulted or challenged. As a result, new perspectives are generated. General Metz's experience demonstrates how the leadership in the Najaf offensive was entirely open to differing opinions from other members of the armed services, other countries, and even partner forces within the country itself. The successful outcome of the situation was contingent on the Iraqi Prime Minister having confidence that the case laid before him had been crafted only after exhausting every possible scenario and consulting with the correct assembly of stakeholders.

Accept failure in exercise…it provides more lessons

The naturally competitive nature of human beings encourages participants in war games and simulations to strive to "win" the exercise—that is, to achieve a single solution in one day of practice that wholly prepares them for the entire range of impending crises. Strong and effective crisis leaders, however, create a culture that is open and honest about the shortcomings identified during the game, and thus one that encourages sharing those opportunities for development and improvement with participants. The value of war games is not ultimately designing a solution that fits every possible scenario, but rather highlighting capability gaps and vulnerabilities that should be addressed to make any solution that much stronger and more effective. It is natural for a war game to result in tension, argument, and even failure. This open and honest discourse, and the failure it sometimes points to, produces a more coherent picture of an organization's ability or inability to implement their plans. Discovering these breaking points illuminates issues in standard operating procedures, business strategies, and organizational structure that impede the ability to effectively respond and recover during crisis. Leaders who acknowledge failure during an exercise are more likely to implement changes that will be necessary for an organization to emerge from a real-life crisis intact and stronger than before.

Encourage lively debate and discourse…do not presume the inevitable

One of the benefits of war gaming is the freedom to ask "What if?" The best crisis management plans provide an actionable set of guidelines for management teams to execute against, but also allow for the flexibility to make decisions that may change the course of the crisis response. War games encourage the discussion of contrary viewpoints and provide a risk-free space to test existing assumptions and entertain contrary ones. During simulations, leaders should encourage opposing opinions, leveraging the resulting friction to spark creativity. As General Sattler notes, "we learned the importance of soliciting the input of all parties involved in the simulation and not shutting out discourse based on a predefined notion of what "should" happen according to an existing plan or process." In the case of Ambassador Blaney's management of the crisis in Liberia, external parties had predicted an outcome of the situation well before its actual conclusion. Allowing such bias and intellectual inflexibility to dominate an organization's crisis preparation has led to innumerable failures on the battlefield and in the boardroom. Strong crisis leaders are able to make an unbiased assessment as to whether or not the outcome of a scenario can be altered with the correct pressure applied in the correct places. This is a direct result of the willingness to accept simulations that purposely challenge existing biases and assumptions, directly going after undesirable consequences. The ability of advisors to see beyond popular opinion to the core chances of success of the operation is critical.

Build, test, and strengthen

Crisis leadership is in many cases a battle of assurance. During a crisis, external stakeholders will not be placated by vague assertions that the organization has a plan in place to handle novel scenarios, nor will they be patient when those plans do not come to fruition. A critical element of crisis leadership is being able to articulate a carefully considered plan of action. Envision your least receptive audience, include them in your war gaming and simulation, and learn what they need to *hear*, as much as what you need to *say*. Ambassador Blaney articulates that a critical success factor in the aftermath of the Liberian crisis was the ability to convince key stakeholders in the U.S. and elsewhere of the importance of rebuilding the country and staving off further conflict. Because he had subjected the messaging to substantial rigor via multiple scenarios, the Ambassador had a clearly defined sense of who would listen to the logic and reason of the argument he put forward. This scenario is applicable for crisis leaders across the board, who, in crisis situations, may find their friends to be few and far between. Knowing who can be counted on to deliver a positive message or provide a necessary injection of capital in advance of the crisis can accelerate the decision-making process and cement relationships for years following the crisis.

Cross the rubicon

Perhaps not all crisis leaders will **physically** cross a bridge of decision-making as did Ambassador Blaney in the anecdote above, but there is little doubt that these individuals will face key decision points where they may face doubts or controversy about their leadership. An organization with a strong crisis infrastructure in place has rehearsed and approved individuals with the authority to "pull the plug" on operations or lines of business, expecting and accepting the uproar that will ensue in the marketplace or the community. Because they have "been there, done that" in the simulations, successful crisis leaders understand when they have reached a point of no return and accept the ambiguity that comes with it, acknowledging that a revolutionary and disruptive solution to a crisis may in fact result in more stability long-term. War gaming allows these innovative or non-traditional solutions to be tested with minimal risk.

Manage with the end game in sight

In many cases, a crisis situation will appear unsolvable at the outset. This pessimism is unsurprising—having been caught off-guard by a crisis, leaders may be prejudiced to believe that they will suffer heavy losses or may not even survive the crisis. Overcoming this bias is essential to ensuring that once an upswing in the crisis occurs, lines of business or personnel are ready to respond accordingly. Whether this means bringing systems back online or bringing back in staff that were reduced as a result of the crisis, leaders should not let the impacts of the disruption linger unnecessarily. Having the optimism and the confidence to begin to restore normal business operations at the appropriate moment is a courageous decision indicative of a strong crisis leader. This optimism and confidence comes from already having seen potential versions of the future in previous simulations, thereby being able to plan backwards to know what steps to take in what order to achieve that same end state in the real world.

Harnessing the narratives and lessons learned provided by these four experienced crisis leaders, executives can take away key insights that are most poignant for their particular situation. In addition, they can learn how to develop or enhance certain qualities within their own organizations to ensure they are best prepared to understand, recognize, and anticipate risks, as well as confront, respond, and recover from unavoidable crises.

Engaging in a disciplined analytic process that brings together diverse opinions and stakeholders, and then immerses them in novel scenarios that occur on the fringe of known and predictable paths—particularly those which are in direct opposition to existing biases and assumptions—will assess and then stress-test leaders' abilities and skill sets, ultimately enabling them to emerge stronger and better equipped to deal with an dynamic and uncertain future.

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