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Grief Leadership

Leader Influences on Resilience and Recovery following Community Disaster

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Introduction

This chapter provides a novel conception as to how leaders may influence resilient stress responding at the community level. To identify leadership effects on resilience, we examine several case studies of communities experiencing crises or disasters. The first case is a military air disaster in which 248 soldiers died in a plane crash when returning from overseas deployment. Drawing upon interviews and observations conducted in the home community following the crash, the impact of senior leader actions on community recovery was assessed. Six additional historical cases are considered via media accounts and observations, and provide further examples of positive and negative leader influence on communities responding to disaster. In the cases presented, positive grief leadership entails providing recognition of the loss and suffering, honouring the victims, linking the loss to abiding shared values, deriving useful lessons from the experience, and identifying tasks and goals to pursue toward a hopeful future.

The observation that people respond differently to the same external stressful conditions has led to a surge in interest in the concept of resilience. In simple terms, resilience describes coping effectively and bouncing back quickly from stressful or adverse events. The question of why some people are more resilient than others against the ill-effects of stress has thus far been addressed mainly at the individual level (Layne et al., 2007). However, increasing attention is going to understanding resilience at the social or group level (Gaillard, 2007; Kimhi & Eshel, 2009). In what follows, we explore the question of how resilience might

be increased across entire social groups through what community leaders say and do following extreme adverse events such as disasters and mass killings. We describe several examples to show how leaders may foster resilient responding.

Methods

This work utilizes the case study method, a form of qualitative inquiry suitable for investigating complex phenomena in their natural context (Creswell, 2014; Stewart, 2014; Yin, 2014). Cases were selected for study based on the following criteria: (1) the event was widely recognized as a major, unusual disaster or crisis; (2) the event had broad impact on a large group or community; (3) key leaders were present or emerged during and after the disaster; and (4) leader actions and statements were observable or otherwise recorded and available for study. Seven relevant cases were identified, two historical and five contemporary. Case material was drawn mainly from open-source newspaper and broadcast media reports. In two cases, these accounts were supplemented by the author's own observations and interviews conducted with community members. Such application of multiple methods is recommended wherever possible in case study research (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). In what follows, the case observations are presented along with discussion of results.

Case 1: The U.S. Army's Gander Disaster

Two weeks before Christmas in December 1985, a plane carrying U.S. Army soldiers home from a 6-month deployment in the Sinai desert crashed after a refuelling stop in Gander, Newfoundland. All 248 soldiers aboard were killed, as well as 6 crew members. The crash was followed by a long and gruesome crash site recovery operation. Efforts to collect and identify remains of the victims, most badly burned and fragmented, took over three months to complete. News of the crash reached the soldiers' home base at Fort Campbell, Kentucky as family members were already gathering at the airstrip to welcome the soldiers home. This was a community disaster for the residents of Fort Campbell on a scale not experienced since World War II. Following the crash, the author was part of a research team from the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research and Uniformed Services University of the Health Science conducting an extensive study of community responses to the Gander disaster. Additional details on the research methodology are available in Bartone and Wright (1990) and Wright and Bartone (1994). Reactions in the community were shock, denial and grief.

Only hours after the crash, the Commanding General of Fort Campbell's 101st Airborne Division, Major General Burton J. Patrick,

stood before assembled families and troops in a gymnasium building and offered the following words. He said (paraphrasing) ‘...we have three major tasks before us. First, we must experience this terrible loss of friends, comrades and loved ones. The loss cannot be denied; we must accept it and the grief it brings (at this point the General’s voice cracked and he wiped a tear from his eye). Next, we must reach out, wrap our arms around the family members who have lost husbands and fathers, and take care of them. And then we must pick ourselves up and work ever harder to rebuild the unit and return ourselves to a mission-ready status. In this, we will be honouring our lost soldiers, and doing what they would most want us to do.’

With these words and gestures, the Commanding General did several things that facilitated a healthy grief response in the community. He gave explicit recognition to the loss, and at the same time granted permission to everyone to admit and experience their pain and grief. Following this statement, many of the assembled soldiers were observed shedding tears, something quite unusual in military groups. The leader also showed compassion and concern by directing special attention to the family members, while at the same time uniting the larger community in a broader purpose: to take care of these families in their grief. Finally, he held out for the community a hopeful future to work toward, putting the unit back together and going on with the mission of national defense. At the same time he drew a connection for the community between getting back to work, and by so doing giving honour to the memory of those killed. Following his speech, the General’s message was repeated many times in media interviews, and in speeches and comments made by subordinate leaders throughout the community. The term ‘grief leadership’ was subsequently applied by Ingraham (1987) to describe what appeared to be highly constructive statements and actions by leaders at Fort Campbell. In interviews conducted with soldiers across the division, many indicated that it was these comments by the General and other senior leaders that ‘made it OK’ to grieve the loss, and at the same time served to strengthen their resolve to go forward and rebuild.

In this same disaster scenario, another example of positive grief leadership came three days after the crash when U.S. President Ronald Reagan and his wife visited Fort Campbell to meet with the grieving families, and preside at a memorial service. This was also a major media event, with Reagan’s speech carried live by all major U.S. television networks. The actions of Reagan and his wife – the very fact of their presence – conveyed to the community a message that they were important, that their loss and sacrifice was recognized and shared in some way by the entire nation. Additionally, the Reagans made it a point

to meet and talk individually with surviving family members, widows, parents and children, putting a personal, compassionate face on their visit. In his formal remarks, Reagan again gave recognition to the sacrifice and loss experienced by family members and friends, while memorializing in heroic terms the dead soldiers. Significantly, he also sought to link the loss to larger, ongoing shared goals and values, including national security and world peace (soldiers killed in the crash were returning from peacekeeping duty in the Sinai). These actions and words not only provided comfort to those in grief, but served to increase the sense of commitment and shared purpose for the survivors.

Case 2: The U.S. Civil War and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

A notable historical example of positive grief leadership can be found in the U.S. President Lincoln's short address at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in 1863. Gettysburg was the site of one of the bloodiest battles in the US Civil War, a highly divisive conflict that pit brother against brother and resulted in 260,000 dead, and countless more maimed and injured – more dead than in all U.S. wars combined. In his short but eloquent address, Lincoln sought to provide victors and vanquished alike with a unifying common purpose and sense of meaning in the loss, and a larger common goal that would also serve to bind previous combatants together:

'Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.'

Here, Lincoln begins by evoking history, reminding the listener of the noble ideals on which the nation was founded. He goes on to pay homage to the dead, without regard to which side they fought on. Then, he artfully re-orientes the community to the future, but in a way that further honours the dead:

'The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the

great task remaining before us – that from these honoured dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.’¹

Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, 1863

It took Lincoln just over two minutes to deliver the ten sentences of this speech. With these few words, he gave recognition to the dead and wounded and their grieving families, while at the same time holding out a vision for a positive future – a united, peaceful, free and thriving country – that could give deeper meaning to what at close range appeared as overwhelming and senseless death and destruction. Although broadcast news media did not exist in those days, Lincoln’s speech was reprinted and discussed in newspapers around the country, and had a healing impact on the national community.

Case 3: Mass Shooting at Political Rally in Tucson, Arizona, January 8, 2011

A more recent example of positive grief leadership occurred in Tucson, Arizona on January 8, 2011. A lone gunman attacked U.S. congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, who was holding a meeting with constituents in her home district. Giffords was shot in the head and severely wounded. Six people were killed, including a 9-year old girl. Another 12 were injured, in addition to Giffords. Four days after the shootings, President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle made a visit to Tucson. In a nationally televised speech, Obama memorialized the victims, while celebrating the heroic actions of survivors and first responders. At the same time he reminded the community and the nation of important shared values and goals, such as our democratic system of government in which elected officials like Representative Giffords meet with and respond to the concerns of the people they represent.² President and Mrs. Obama also met with family members and survivors, communicating by their presence and manner their recognition and respect. In his remarks, which were heard by millions across the nation, Obama linked the continued pursuit of these ideals to the importance of honouring the contributions and sacrifices of the victims and their families. In doing this, he focused special attention on one of the victims, 9 year old Christina Green:

‘And I believe that for all our imperfections, we are full of decency and goodness, and that the forces that divide us are not as strong as the forces that unite us. I believe that in part because that’s what a child

like Christina Taylor Green believed. I want to live up to her expectations. I want America to be as good as (Christina) imagined it to be. All of us, we should do everything we can to make sure this country lives up to our children's expectations... Here on this earth we place our hands over our hearts and we commit ourselves as Americans to forging a country that is forever worthy of (Christina's) gentle, happy spirit.⁷³

President Obama, Tucson, Arizona, January 12, 2011

Case 4: German Bombings of London and Surrounding Areas, World War II, 1940

Other examples of positive grief leadership can be found throughout history. A notable one from World War II is seen in the Nazi bombings of civilian targets in London, which ultimately killed nearly 60,000 people. During the period of the bombings, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill made it a point to remain in London with the people, rather than evacuate to a safer location as many leaders were doing. This contributed to a sense of solidarity and trust in national leadership. During this time also he gave many speeches that inspired the British people to work together and resist the German foe. Here is a brief excerpt from Churchill's radio address to the people of London, September 11, 1940:

'These cruel, wanton, indiscriminate bombings of London are, of course, a part of Hitler's invasion plans. He hopes, by killing large numbers of civilians, and women and children, that he will terrorize and cow the people of this mighty imperial city, and make them a burden and anxiety to the Government...Little does he know the spirit of the British nation, or the tough fibre of the Londoners...who have been bred to value freedom far above their lives.... This is a time for everyone to stand together, and hold firm, as they are doing. I express my admiration for the exemplary manner in which all the Air Raid Precautions services of London are being discharged, especially the Fire Brigade, whose work has been so heavy and also dangerous. All the world that is still free marvels at the composure and fortitude with which the citizens of London are facing and surmounting the great ordeal to which they are subjected, the end of which or the severity of which cannot yet be foreseen. It is a message of good cheer to our fighting forces on the seas, in the air, and in our waiting Armies in all their posts and stations, that we sent them from this capital city. They know that they have behind them a people who will not flinch or weary of the struggle – hard and protracted though it will be; but that we shall rather draw from the heart of suffering itself the means of inspiration and survival, and of a victory won not only for ourselves but for all; a

victory won not only for our own time, but for the long and better days that are to come.’⁴

Here Churchill appeals to national pride, also reminding people of their history of toughness in the face of outside threats, as well as important shared values such as freedom. He also gives recognition and credit to the people of London, and to the emergency responders such as fire brigades. Churchill further emphasizes solidarity by associating the Londoners’ response to the sacrifices being made by British military forces ‘in all their posts and stations...’ He stresses the significance of what they are doing by pointing out that ‘all the world that is still free’ is watching with admiration. Finally, he relates the current suffering and effort to important shared goals (eg., survival) and a hopeful future of ‘long and better days to come.’

These brief case studies provide examples of positive grief leadership, or leadership that serves to increase resilience and healthy coping following disaster, loss and death. There is also something to learn from considering examples of leadership that may hurt or damage community resilience. Three short examples of negative grief leadership are provided for this purpose.

Case 5: Earthquake in Japan, March 11, 2011

A major earthquake (magnitude 9) struck the northeast coast of Japan on Friday, March 11, 2011, triggering a devastating tsunami and with many strong aftershocks. Official reports confirmed 15,698 dead, and another 4,666 missing. The tsunami and earthquake aftershocks led to extensive damage and meltdown of three reactors at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, and less severe problems at other reactor sites.

Many observers of the Japanese earthquake disaster have commented on failures of leadership by senior government officials. According to Yas Idei for example, Japanese leaders were largely absent from the disaster zones such as in the towns and cities surrounding the damaged nuclear power plant in Fukushima (Idei, 2011). Prime Minister Naoto Kan and other senior government officials had been mostly silent and invisible. When they did speak up, it was mainly to try to reassure the population that the damage is controlled, radiation levels are safe, and food and water were not contaminated. However, the failure of these leaders to visit the damaged areas, and lead by example by eating the food declared to be safe, caused many Japanese people to question the honesty of their leaders (Tabuchi, Belson & Onishi, 2011). The following excerpt comes from an email provided by a Japanese colleague who was in the disaster area:

‘Japanese government does not set Safe/Hazard zone yet. The Citizens are stressed. Citizen does not know they are in safe zone or not. Japanese government request them to stay there. Radiation counts were hidden from public. Last week, Medical association strongly asked to government to disclose and set safe zone. Government just released radiation information, but not for Fukushima and Ibaraki, close area. This stress comes from unsureness of safety. They are not stressed by earth quake. I guess the world feel strange about those area people, no panic, no criminal activity. Because we are calm and do not scare about our risk of life, but we appreciate we are alive. Everybody try to survive. Now lots of people are still dying because of not proper support by Japanese Government. I am not targeting Jap Gov. I guess we do not have right management now. Japanese government has power to do proper way with resource but they do not have decision maker....’

(Personal communication, 21 March 2011; name withheld)

Of the many problems in the official Japanese response to this disaster, it is clear that a main one was the lack of accurate and timely information provided to people in affected areas. And as senior leaders continued to release only partial information that often seemed contradictory, people became more and more distrustful of their leaders and fearful about their condition.

Case 6: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans

Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans on August 29, 2005. The destruction was enormous, estimated at \$81 billion, and with 1,836 people killed. There are many examples of both positive and negative leadership to be seen in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. We will focus on just one incident involving President George W. Bush. Bush had been on vacation at his ranch in Texas, and on his return to Washington, directed the pilot to fly over New Orleans and the surrounding area so that he could view the hurricane damage from the air. He was photographed looking out the window of Air Force One, and the photo was later released by the White House. Whether true or not, the impression that this photo conveyed to hurricane victims was of a detached and uncaring leader who was content to view the disaster from afar, rather than get on the ground to really find out what was going on and do something to help. Shortly after his return to Washington, Bush gave an upbeat, smiling speech which also conveyed the impression of a leader out of touch with the gravity of suffering and destruction currently being experienced in New Orleans. According to one commentator in the New York Times:

'George W. Bush gave one of the worst speeches of his life yesterday, especially given the level of national distress and the need for words of consolation and wisdom. In what seems to be a ritual in this administration, the president appeared a day later than he was needed. He then read an address of a quality more appropriate for an Arbor Day celebration: a long laundry list of pounds of ice, generators and blankets delivered to the stricken Gulf Coast. He advised the public that anybody who wanted to help should send cash, grinned, and promised that everything would work out in the end'⁵.

Here we see again that it is important to communities coping with highly stressful events that they can see their leaders right there alongside with them. This example also shows that the tone that is taken by the leader in his/her comments also carries meaning to listeners, for good or ill.

Case 7: Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001; West Point Response

Again, we will focus only on one example of leadership following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. West Point, New York, the home of the U.S. Military Academy, was one of many U.S. communities affected by the 9/11 attacks in a rather personal way. The author was living and working at West Point at the time, and so had a chance to observe community and leader responses. In addition to being just one hour north of the World Trade Center attacks in New York City, many of the faculty and students at West Point had friends or family members working at the Pentagon and in New York City. Cadets and most faculty also belong to the military, and know that they may be called upon at any time to defend against terrorist threats to the nation and our allies.

Tensions were high following the attacks, and the whole community was desperate for information. The attacks happened on a Tuesday. Strangely, there were no announcements or statements of any kind from senior leaders (West Point has three general officer positions: the Superintendent is a 3-star general, and the Commandant and Dean are both 1-star generals). People got their news from television, phone calls, and rumours. The normal academic and training schedule was maintained without a break through the remainder of the week. On Thursday, an email message went out to the community announcing there would be a memorial service at noon on Friday. At this brief and highly formalized service, none of the general officers appeared. This silence on the part of senior leaders continued into the following week, leaving a local information vacuum. This leadership silence contributed to a generalized unease and feeling of uncertainty throughout the community. Adding to the confusion was the fact that there was no opportunity for the community to gather together in one place to hear

about and discuss what happened. More memorial services were held later on, but these were divided along religious lines, with separate services at the Protestant, Catholic and Jewish chapels of West Point.

Some general points can be taken from these examples of negative grief leadership. One is that it is generally not helpful to the community for leaders to be silent following a disaster. People want information, and they look to their own leaders to provide it. And without leaders to model and discuss responses, anxiety and uncertainty can grow and spread. Leaders must also be truthful, or risk losing the confidence of the people. Finally, it is important for leaders to be present and visible, in order to be seen as sharing the risks and grief of the people.

General Discussion

A useful theoretical framework for understanding how grief leadership may increase resilience and healthy responding to stress is found in the work on human psychological hardiness. There is now considerable empirical evidence that psychological hardiness, a measurable personality style that includes commitment, control and challenge, is an important stress resilience resource at the individual level (Eschleman, Bowling & Alarcon, 2010). People high in psychological hardiness show greater commitment – the abiding sense that life is meaningful and worth living; control – the belief that one chooses and influences his or her own future; and acceptance of challenge – a perspective that change in life is not be feared, but is interesting and valuable. I have previously argued that leaders in organizations such as the military can increase hardiness within their units by their actions, policies and statements, especially regarding stressful events (Bartone, 1999). In a similar vein, Gal (1997) has shown that a sense of commitment is critical for soldier performance in demanding military operations, and that effective leaders find ways to increase that sense of commitment.

In situations of ‘grief leadership’ such as those described above, essentially these same processes may operate in a more far-reaching way, especially when the leaders are senior national figures and relevant events are covered by the mass media. As psychologist Drew Westen (2007) argues, our brains have evolved to respond emotionally as well as rationally to external events, especially when it comes to challenges or threats to survival. Further, he argues that the stories told by leaders can have a large influence over how people react in choice situations. What leaders say, and how they say it, matters. Some support for this idea comes from a study by Kimhi and Eshel (2009), who found that community resilience, which importantly includes trust in leaders, is associated with a more positive recovery following traumatic stress exposure. Especially in grief and crisis situations, leaders can foster an

enhanced sense of commitment and purpose in the community by giving recognition to the loss/tragedy, while at the same time establishing a link between the loss itself and working toward recovery. By emphasizing the shared aspects of the loss, as well as encouraging mutual support and assistance, leaders likewise build up social commitment and cohesion. Hardiness-challenge, which involves perceiving changes (even bad ones) as opportunities to learn and grow, is enhanced when leaders point out (and demonstrate) the value that can be found in the loss, as for example in honouring the dead by working toward recovery and improvement. Finally, the sense of control is enhanced as leaders remind people to recognize and face up to the loss, take action to assist each other, and also pay homage to the dead and secure a positive future by working toward recovery.

Conclusion

This case presentation and analysis suggests that leaders exert an important influence, for good or ill, on how community members cope with adverse events. One of the key mechanisms in this process appears to be an increased sense of meaning and commitment that is realized under positive grief leadership. Social commitment and cohesion also can be enhanced through leader actions and statements. The effects of grief leadership, whether positive or negative, can also be magnified in a number of ways. One is through modeling or emulation. Subordinate leaders throughout the organization will tend to model their own statements and behaviours after those of the senior leader. In this way the positive grief leadership effects are multiplied throughout the community. Similarly, in the absence of clear examples from senior leaders, more junior leaders are likely to be uncertain about how to behave or speak in crisis situations. Another multiplier is media coverage. To the extent that news media broadcast the statements and actions of senior leaders following a disaster, anyone listening can be influenced toward more (or less) positive and resilient responding.

While resilience under stress is ultimately an individual level phenomenon, the responsible processes are amenable to social influence. Especially when groups are confronted with loss and death, leaders can help to foster resilient responses across whole communities by building up the sense of commitment, control, and challenge. Positive grief leadership appears to build resilience in groups through a strengthening of social bonds and sense of commitment, primarily by reminding people of the importance of the mission and shared goals; restoring a feeling of control by outlining tasks that must be accomplished in the near term; and reinforcing the sense of challenge by focussing on learning, as well as a positive future and common ideals to strive for.

Notes

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gettysburg_Address. Accessed 21 May 2019.
2. A similar example is seen in the tragic July, 2011 mass shootings in Oslo, in which a lone gunman killed 77 people, mostly children. Following the killings, the Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg spoke out in words gauged to bolster community strength and resolve to carry on: ‘We are a small country, but a very proud one. Nobody can bomb us to be quiet. Nobody can shoot us to be quiet. Nobody can ever scare us from being Norway.’ Stoltenberg further vowed that the attack would not damage Norwegian democracy: ‘We are still shocked by what has happened, but we will never give up our values. Our response is more democracy, more openness, and more humanity. But never naiveté.’ <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jensstoltenbergbombingmemorial.htm>. Accessed 21 May 2019.
3. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-memorial-service-victims-shooting-tucson>. Accessed 21 May 2019.
4. Winston Churchill ‘Every Man to His Post’ radio address, September 11, 1940. <https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/every-man-to-his-post.html> Accessed 21 May 2019.
5. See ‘Waiting for a leader,’ New York Times editorial, September 1, 2005. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/01/opinion/01thu1.html?oref=login&pagewanted=print> Accessed 21 May 2019.

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