

Feeling Is Believing

By Mark Chussil

We knew that Hurricane Katrina would devastate the Gulf Coast and we should act promptly, decisively, and effectively. But we didn't.

We knew that we were vulnerable to terrorist attack via hijacked airplanes and we should take preventive action. But we didn't.

We knew that the power grid in the United States is fragile and stretched to capacity and we should protect it against blackouts. But we didn't.

We could have, we should have. We didn't. If we spent one-tenth the energy on preparation, protection, and prevention that we spend on repair, blame, and fear, we'd live safer, more-prosperous lives. But we don't.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE FOR US TO DO BETTER?

We know it's critical to train emergency responders - law enforcement, fire fighters, medics, Coast Guard, and so on - and we do that well. Only now, after Hurricane Katrina, are we realizing how critical it is to train leaders, too.

Communities pay a heavy price when leaders make bad decisions, a price measured in thousands of deaths, widespread destruction, and hundreds of billions of dollars added to the national debt. By giving leaders education that can help them make better decisions as a team, we can prevent human and fiscal misery.

There are many reasons why we haven't trained senior leaders, some good, some bad. I'll discuss some of them here. I'll also explain how new technology and capabilities are making decision-making and leadership training more practical and effective than ever before.

WHY WE DON'T TRAIN LEADERS

Reasons why we don't train senior leaders fall into these three categories:

1. We don't think it's necessary
2. We don't think it's possible
3. We've done it already

We don't think it's necessary covers a variety of rationales. It's the cost/benefit analysis that says it's better to focus leaders' time and resources somewhere else. It's the decision to rely on

first-responder and emergency-management experts if a crisis hits. Although those ways of thinking aren't necessarily wrong, the critical assumptions that drive them - e.g., "education is time-consuming and expensive" - *are* often wrong. It's rather like the bumper sticker: if you think education is expensive, try the alternative. Ask the residents of New Orleans.

Denial and complacency sometimes masquerade as *we don't think it's necessary*. Denial and complacency are human foibles to which all of us are prone: I'm busy; it's not a good use of taxpayer money; I don't want to think about such unpleasant things; it's never happened here before; it's someone else's job. No one goes into denial about the benefits of crisis education or complacency after living through a horrific crisis. The trick is to produce that sense of urgency in leaders who have *not* lived through a horrific crisis.

Finally, *we don't think it's necessary* can come from ignorance. An elected official may never have managed a crisis situation, so he or she may simply not know what it's like to make important decisions. Nonetheless, when a crisis hits, he or she is the ultimate decision maker. Again, that sense of urgency is needed.

We don't think it's possible can come from two directions. One is an assumption based on prior experience with senior-leader training; the other is the idea that every crisis is so different, it's impossible to conduct education that could help in all cases. Although sincere, well-meaning people can accept either of those thoughts, both are simply wrong. Extraordinary education for senior leaders *is* possible, using advanced technology, top educators, local experts, and battle-tested facilitators.

We've done it already might be the biggest impediment to leaders getting the skills they need to make effective decisions in a crisis. People who have gone through tabletop exercises, emergency drills, and detailed planning may genuinely believe they've done all they should, all they can, even all that's possible. However, it's clear that those processes have fallen short of what we need. For example, the simulated Hurricane Pam demonstrated New Orleans' vulnerability to a major hurricane, yet when the real Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf, leaders were unprepared. Some even said, "we didn't know it could be this bad."

How can they not know it could be this bad when their own people had been squawking for years about the possible destruction? These leaders are not stupid and they're not callous, and there's more to it than denial and complacency.

Believing is seeing. If you believe (or want to believe) something to be true - such as *we don't think it's necessary* - you will (unconsciously) filter what you see and hear. It's so common, it's got a name: confirmation bias. As a result, the only evidence to get through the filter is the evidence that confirms what you already believe. We all do it, which means that it takes unusually perceptive and strong leadership to resist it.

History sadly shows that our preparation for and responses to many crises have been sorely lacking. We look to experienced professionals for answers. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how you look at it), there aren't many people with top-level experience in

successfully handling serious crises. We could rely on on-the-job training; *de facto*, that's what we've done. The problem is, as we've seen, that type of training is terribly expensive and tragically late.

We need a better way to get the advantages of experience.

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Why do we value experience so much? Why do we say 'you don't know something until you've lived it'? Why do we forget lectures and remember foxholes?

Emotional engagement.

As human beings, we relate to human experiences. That's why in a Holocaust of six million Jews, the story of Anne Frank stands out. That's why a magazine photo of an anguished survivor cuts deeper in our hearts than a photo of a deserted street. That's why the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall, with its list of 58,195 names, is so haunting.

Emotional engagement. That's what gets our attention. It's also how we learn. We don't learn the dismay of losing a job or the heartbreak of losing a lover by *thinking* it; we learn by *feeling* it. Read a story: your emotions are relatively weak. A live newscast: they're much stronger. Living through it: the most intense of all.

Otto von Bismarck said, "Fools say that they learn by experience. I prefer to profit by others' experience." He was onto something.

Education is a process by which people learn cheaply what others discovered at high cost - sometimes *very* high cost - through direct experience. The emotional engagement of living through an experience is key to learning. We just don't want to pay those very high costs.

We can produce real learning and action by creating emotional engagement in a safe environment. In other words: simulation.

My colleagues and I have conducted about 100 business war games for dozens of the world's largest companies. Our war games always last longer than one "round;" that is, we run a simulation, participants see the results, and then we roll back the clock to let them re-strategize.

We've found that the first round is almost always thrown away. Despite their best intentions and despite our strongest admonitions, participants - especially those role-playing their own business - still adopt conventional thinking in the first round. They often feel they're stretching, yet they only tweak an action plan to which they're intellectually or emotionally attached. It's normal, it's rational, and it's sensible to start by choosing a strategy that experts like and agree upon. In addition, because people are systematically and universally overconfident, they underestimate the things that could occur and overestimate their ability to cope with what will happen.

Then participants get their wake-up call: the results of the first round. They watch their revenue drop when they predicted it would rise. They watch their profits nosedive instead of skyrocket. They watch their adversaries exploit their weaknesses. Most important, they watch their plans, their ideas, and their careers turn to simulated dust.

They are shocked, and that's wonderful. It's not wonderful because their plans failed. It's wonderful because their shock leads to solutions.

What they *don't* do is deny the (simulated) events as they unfold, no matter how unexpected. They don't retreat to comfortable, complacent conference-room rejection of an expert's prediction, they don't check out because "it's just a game". They deal with what happens in the simulation, and in so doing they gain new appreciation for what could happen and for what it takes to respond.

FEELING IS BELIEVING

Simulation participants understand the necessity to change, and they feel the necessity become urgent. Believing may be seeing, but *feeling is believing*. They overcome their biggest impediment, the idea that change isn't necessary. Then, *believing it's necessary*, they rise to the occasion. I've seen it happen over and over that their shock breaks down barriers to constructive thinking and action. I've seen senior leaders make 180° changes in direction, have the courage of their convictions, and produce great results.

It's far better to get that shock in a simulation, where no one gets hurt and you can act to safeguard the future, than to get that shock in real life, where many people get hurt and you regret the past.

Consider this hair-raising and all-too-realistic situation.

You are the mayor of a city. A bomb has exploded on a bridge as cars and a train passed over it. Vehicles and their occupants fall into the river and onto the river banks. Fire fighters and police swarm to the site, followed by emergency medical personnel. One victim is trapped underneath a car. He is bleeding to death. The only way to get him out is to amputate the limb that's caught under the car. Medics are preparing to do exactly that.

Then the police discover a suspicious box nearby. It could be another bomb. Terrorists have been known to plant secondary bombs, designed to kill the crowds and first responders that arrive on a disaster scene.

Do you let the medics stay onsite so they can extricate the trapped person? If you do and if the suspicious box turns out to be a bomb, multiple people will die. If you tell the medics to evacuate, the trapped person will surely die, and the suspicious box may turn out to be harmless. What would you do? There's no time to get more information. Decide!

That was just one part of a scenario we recently simulated. The mayor had to make that decision (and many others) amid the chaos and confusion of a major attack, where nothing was known with certainty and a city was at risk.

These simulations deal with challenges where it's hard to see which answers are right and which are wrong, especially if your decisions must coordinate with someone else's decisions. There may not even *be* a right answer, as with the suspicious box. Instead, these simulations focus on enhancing decision-making and leadership skills. Learning to function under pressure, rather than folding or panicking. Learning to make decisions effectively, rather than rushing to decide or waiting too long. Learning to make good use of staff and resources, rather than micro-managing or over-delegating.

As someone who role-played the mayor during a test run of the terrorist-attack simulation - and whose mistakes caused many simulated deaths - I can attest to the simulation's emotional power. I won't forget that experience, and I want those who are entrusted with public safety to learn from their simulated experience before they have to make those decisions for real.

The toll of natural disasters, major accidents, and deliberate attacks is terrible. What makes them tragic is that they don't have to be so bad. We can do better.

About the Author

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