

Responding to Crises

By Ronald L. Tammen, Ph.D.

After an unconscionable delay, help arrived in New Orleans and the surrounding areas in the form of United States military forces. There was an immediate sense of relief expressed by state and local officials, as well as those on the ground looking for help. The image of a National Guard general officer giving orders, telling troops and police to lower their rifles, and demanding action, reassured the people of that city and the nation.

The governor and the mayor had been vocal in their calls for assistance, but they had little in the way of resources to commit. FEMA was noted by its absence in what will go down in history as a criminally inept performance. Hope was fading fast and the fabric of society was being torn apart as a consequence. And then the military arrived, restoring faith and inspiration to those who had little of either.

Why was the military institution the only efficient and effective force in this situation? Why did the picture of men and women in uniform, under command, so reassure the survivors and those looking on from afar? It would be easy to argue that the military establishment has the resources - personnel, equipment, and mobility - to get the job done. But that conclusion alone would hide the most significant element in this equation.

The reason why military units are effective has to do with training. Unlike their civilian counterparts, the armed forces are built upon an ethic of training both in the field and in the school house. The officers and enlisted personnel spend the overwhelming portion of their careers either studying military operations or practicing them. Practice involves the accumulation of knowledge from prior history, the study of theory and incessant field operations. The military services do this as a source of professionalism and because they know that, from time to time, they will be called upon to defend the interests of their country. The stakes are high so their training must be as realistic and as demanding as possible.

Now contrast this with the typical civil official. A mayor or governor or corporate official spends the overwhelming portion of his or her professional career in management. Management under day-to-day conditions. It's certainly stressful in some cases and without doubt requires talented and educated leaders. But there is little or no time to train for that extraordinary event, which may come only once in a lifetime.

Put another way, senior military officials spend 90% of their time training for the 10% of the time they may have to demonstrate their skills in war. Senior civilian officials spend 99% of their time managing the more or less routine events common to most organizations. When a hundred-year disaster materializes, they simply are not prepared, in terms of training, for such a

catastrophe. Some may rise to the occasion and provide inspirational leadership. But even that masks the real issue. What more could they have done, how many more lives could have been saved and property protected and economic assets preserved, if only they had been prepared in advance? If they had been professionally trained?

Modern training, though pioneered in some ways by the military establishment, is not a mystery in the American marketplace. Service organizations and corporations all realize the value of training their personnel. They train for maximum every day efficiency, just-in-time deliveries and to insure the best practices in government. They do not train for highly unlikely or unpredictable events because it doesn't pay to do so. Yet that is what we must now do for our midlevel to senior decision makers.

Training for civilian decision makers, both public and private, must be as realistic and demanding as possible. For a generation, a few decision makers have engaged in "table top" or "what if" exercises. By role playing based upon written scenarios, they mimic what might happen in an emergency. These exercises have proved useful but more so for what weaknesses they disclose rather than skills they develop.

What our key decision makers need today is exposure to real time gaming and simulation techniques. Consider that key decision points are reached in a crisis during periods of maximum stress and minimal information. These key decisions may affect the lives of thousands and economic activity in the billions. Only a sophisticated game or simulation can mimic the conditions at these pivotal moments. And only a game or simulation can be adjusted, replayed, and therefore reanalyzed from many different perspectives after the fact. There may be more than one "right" solution to the crisis, more than one set of tradeoffs. A game or simulation can create not only the texture, coloring, and feel of a real event, but it can allow participants to revisit decisions almost instantly to reveal alternative outcomes. That is the real value of this kind of training - creating a set of skills that is transferable over a broad range of natural and manmade disaster scenarios.

The military has spent tens of billions on state-of-the-art gaming and simulations centers on military bases and at military schools across the country. Senior military officials and the occasional civilian leader reap the benefits of this highly sophisticated training. It is critically important that similar technologies now be utilized in the civilian marketplace for governmental and private executives who, one day, may face a situation for which they are not now prepared.

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