Meta-Leadership Lessons from the Response to the Boston Marathon Bombing

An NPLI Case History

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Meta-Leadership: The Boston Marathon Bombing

The Boston Marathon Bombing Memorial, 2013 (Photo: NPLI, 2014).

Background

During the week of April 15-19, 2013, two major crises struck the Boston metropolitan area. On Monday, April 15th, two improvised explosive devices detonated near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, killing three people, and injuring 264. By the early hours of Friday, the 19th, the suspects were identified as two young brothers. That evening, the suspects killed a young MIT campus police officer leading to a manhunt beginning in Cambridge and ending with a violent confrontation with law enforcement in Watertown, Massachusetts. In the melee, elder brother Tamerlin Tsarnaev was wounded, captured, and later died. The escape of the younger brother, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev resulted in the first terror-

related voluntary shelter-in-place closure of a major metropolitan area in the United States. By Friday evening, just 102 hours after the bombs detonated, the second suspect was apprehended effectively bringing the response to the bombings to an end. By all accounts, the response was effective, efficient, and successful.

This Case History is based on an NPLI study of leadership in the aftermath of the attacks, both through interviews and observation, as well as media coverage of the events.[1]

The Impact of Complexity and a Foundation of Collaboration

This was an extraordinarily complex set of events that not only traversed multiple local jurisdictions geographically, but also saw numerous local, state, and federal elected officials and agency leads involved in the Marathon Bombing Response (MBR). Businesses, non-profit organizations, and private citizens also actively engaged in treating survivors, assisting in the investigation, and fostering community resilience. The action played out via traditional media—who were present in force at the finish line of this internationally-broadcast spectacle —as well as on social media.

These many intersecting dynamics compounded for leaders both the process of decision making and the decisions themselves. One of the most

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[1] *See* Marcus, L.J., McNullty, E.M., Dorn, B.C., & Goralnick, E., April 2014. Crisis Metal-leadership Lessons from the Boston Marathon Bombings Response: The Ingenuity of Swarm Intelligence.

critical of these dynamics was the relationships among many of the leaders in the Boston emergency response community and with regional cross-agency organizations. These relationships were built on a foundation of collaboration formed well before the city hosted the 2004 Democratic National Convention. That experience, so soon after 9/11, compelled local connectivity and bred the solidarity evident during the MBR.

Timeline of the Marathon Bombing events (Credit: CNN, 2013)

Meta-Leadership Lessons from the MBR

Dimension 1: The Person of the Meta-Leader

Several NPLI Alumni described "going to the basement," after the second explosion. Many leaders had assumed there was a benign cause for the first explosion, an accident of some sort. Once the second explosion hit, they realized this was a terrorist attack. Leaders got themselves out of the basement by recalling their training and particularly, an exercise scenario similar to the Marathon bombings. This training bolstered their individual confidence— "I can do this"—and then collective confidence— "we can do this"—as they

encountered their peers/subordinates who were also responding as they had been trained.

MBR Leaders demonstrated high emotional intelligence throughout the week. Conflict was infrequent and, when it did emerge, was resolved quickly and out of public eye. The long history of working together fostered such interpersonal agility.

- *Recommendation: Embed "the basement," emotional intelligence, and other behavior elements into standard training and drills to foster awareness and provide tools to overcome personal and interpersonal challenges during response.*

MBR leaders had a bounty of experience on the job and with one another. This experience translated into confidence in each other when it mattered most. With that shared quality, they were able to focus their perspectives on their roles as leaders and on fostering productive interactions with others. This was a major contributor to the cooperation and collaboration that emerged during the response.

- *Recommendation: Design and participate in realistic drills and exercises that include the full-range of entities that must work together effectively in an actual event.*

Dimension 2: The Situation

Leaders often initially understand and translate the situation in line with their expectations. This bias was evident in the distinction between the two cities where leaders were involved – Boston and Washington, D.C. Officials in Boston initially

assessed that this had to be the work of international terrorists because they felt that they had a good handle on local threats. In D.C., officials concluded that it must be domestic terrorism because it happened on April 15th (Tax Day, Patriot's Day). Security leaders in D.C. saw few facts and inserted their own assumptions and biases. As leaders in Boston had an eye witness view, the facts on the ground lead to a very different conclusion.

- *Recommendation: Include cognitive bias training in leader development and review possible biases throughout an event.*

"Location, location, location." As MBR leaders continued to perceive the changing nature of the situation, they realized location was crucial. At first, they were asking "Where am I now?" in relation to the crisis. This thought pattern evolved to "Where do I need to be?" In most cases, the initial answer was for leaders to move quickly, intentionally closer to the actual event to gain first hand understanding of the situation and gather information. Then, recognizing there could be a continuing threat, the question became, "Where should we establish a base?" Blocks way, the Westin Hotel provided leaders and investigators with a home base, close to the crime scene and further away from imminent danger.

- *Recommendation: Intentionally question and determine the most appropriate location for leaders during an event. It may not be the standard command center.*

Dimension 3: Connectivity

Officials and first responders welcomed the participation of the public in the initial response. The response was one of the "whole community," with government leadership, law enforcement, the public, and private organizations working together.

One failure of communication occurred when officials neglected to alert the public or media about a controlled explosion on Boylston Street (explosion number three). This initially caused additional confusion.

- *Recommendation: Err on the side of over-communication. Assume that almost everyone can see or learn most information in near-real time, particularly with the use of social media, which was rampant during the response (both by the public and law enforcement as a means of communicating ongoing events and updates).*

According to Rich Serino, Deputy Administrator of FEMA at the time of the MBR, the local connectivity during the response was "no accident." It was built over years of multi-agency, cross-sector planning and training. An important lesson, though, was learned via the lack of connectivity between local and national leaders— i.e., between those involved in the response in Boston and those in D.C. From Boston's perspective, media and leadership participation in D.C. interfered with local response efforts. For example, interviewees felt that mistaken news of an apprehension of a suspect(s) on Wednesday,

April 17th most likely emanated from D.C. and was a distraction for Boston leaders and the public.[2]

- *Recommendation: Learn from Boston's use of major events as "planned disasters" as opportunities to build connectivity across organizational boundaries.*

Other Key Takeaways

Among the findings from the study of the MBR is that elements of "swarm intelligence" were evident in leaders' relationships and actions during the week of April 15, 2013. Swarm intelligence is a phenomenon originally observed in termites, ants, and birds where complex activities emerged without a clear leader. Many of the leaders noted a sense of "collective leadership": each felt in charge of their organizational unit, but no one was exerting overall command of the event.

Functions of Swarm Intelligence in Leadership

The functional leadership principles and rules are quite simple and, put in action, can enable what the [NPLI has termed "Swarm Leadership."](#) While these principles and imperatives may appear logical and self-evident, adherence is remarkably difficult during a high stakes crisis with its penetrating emotions and uncertainties:

1) An overriding objective that forges **unity of mission** and connectivity of action; is compelling enough to override standard practices as needed; and obviates bureaucratic obstructions, distractions, or bickering.

2) A **generosity of spirit** that rallies groups and individuals to assist one another and overcome constraints of resources, know-how, or tools to achieve the paramount mission, expressed during the MBR as "Whaddya got? Whaddaya need?"

3) Respect for responsibilities and authorities of others, described as **"staying in one's lane,"** while assisting others to succeed in their lanes to accomplish mission critical duties.

4) Neither taking undue credit nor pointing blame among key players, often portrayed as **"checking your ego at the door," or "no ego/no blame."**

5) Genuine inter-personal trust, camaraderie, and respect developed well before the event, so that an existing, dependable **foundation of trusted relationships** can be leveraged during the event, often described as "don't wait for an emergency to exchange business cards."

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[2] *See Byers, Dan. April 23, 2013. CNN's John King: Boston blunder 'embarrassing', Politico,* https://www.politico.com/blogs/media/2013/04/cnns-john-king-boston-blunder-embarrassing-162389.

About the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative

The NPLI, a joint program of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, was established in 2003 at the request of the federal government. The program conducts research on homeland security, emergency preparedness, public health, and public safety leaders in times of crisis and change, turning lessons learned into an executive education curriculum, case studies and scholarship that highlight best practices.

About Meta-Leadership

The Meta-leadership framework and practice method is core to the NPLI's curriculum. The methodology has been developed and tested through years of field research, academic inquiry, and real-time feedback from practitioners. It continues to evolve. "Graduates of the NPLI executive education program report that this framework has made a significant difference when applied in their real-world problem solving and crisis response," said NPLI Founding Co-director Leonard Marcus. "They reach out to one another and coordinate their actions more pro-actively than they otherwise would have. This sort of Meta-leadership in a crisis or other major event has important public health impact, insofar as agencies are better able to serve the population and reduce the loss of life."

The Meta-leadership framework has three dimensions to teach leadership skills:

1) The Person of the Meta-Leader: self-knowledge, awareness, and discipline;
2) The Situation: discerning the context for leadership, what is happening and what to do about it;
3) Connectivity: fostering positive, productive relationships. Connectivity includes four key directions:
   a) leading down the formal chain of command to subordinates - within one's chain of command - creating a cohesive high-performance team with a unified mission;
   b) leading up to superiors, inspiring confidence and delivering on expectations; enabling and supporting good decisions and priority setting;
   c) leading across to peers and intra-organizational units to foster collaboration and coordination within the same chain of command, which includes other departments, offices, or professional groups within the same organization.
   d) leading beyond to engage external entities, including affected agencies, the public and the media to create unity of purpose and effort in large-scale response to complex events.

The Meta-leadership framework and vocabulary are commonly used across many homeland security, preparedness, and response organizations. Faculty have conducted hundreds of training sessions, including executive education programs at Harvard, as well as on site programs at the White House, Departments of Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, Defense, Veterans Affairs, the CDC, Secret Service, FEMA Transportation Security Administration, and numerous private sector organizations.