
Public Administrators and Cross-Sector Governance in Response to and Recovery From Disasters

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In “Looking for the FEMA Guy” Part 2, Ian Birdsall recalls some of his own experiences as well as those of other people that reflect on some of the major issues faced by public administrators as they tried to respond to the storm and its aftermath. Birdsall mentions that “harsh criticisms have been leveled at each level of government concerning almost every aspect of their performance before, during and after Katrina made landfall.” In his account he focused more on Mississippi’s experience with the impact of Katrina for three reasons. First, recovery from a catastrophic disaster takes a long time and attention shifted to other current issues. Second, research and news reports focused on New Orleans but gave less attention to Mississippi. Finally, he used a balanced perspective in his analysis of response and recovery activities. I agree with him concerning the lack of focus on Mississippi. I would note that my coauthors and I have tried to counter that trend in our efforts to compare Louisiana’s and Mississippi’s responses to Katrina (Kapucu, Augustin, & Garayev, 2009). Birdsall used emergency management cycles (mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery) in his analysis and highlights implications for public administration. I would like to comment on the role of public leadership in managing disasters by partnering with other sectors, levels, and jurisdictions of government.

Catastrophic disasters are characterized by unexpected or unusual size, disruptions to the decision-making capabilities, and an initial breakdown in coordination and communication. High performance in dealing with disasters requires an ability to assess and adapt capacity rapidly, restore or enhance disrupted or inadequate communications, use uncharacteristically flexible

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decision making, and expand coordination and trust of emergency response agencies (Comfort, 1999). Moreover, the public increasingly expects better public sector performance before, during, and after disasters. No single government agency or governmental jurisdiction alone has the required resources and expertise for a coordinated emergency management effort. A better network of public agencies with private and nonprofit sector organizations is critical for the success of disaster response and recovery. Emergency and disaster management requires intergovernmental networks with federal, state, and local governmental units in order to share responsibilities, information, expertise, and communication. This perspective has led to the creation of the National Response Plan replacing the Federal Response Plan—now National Response Framework (NRF). The NRF highlights the partnership of government, private, and nonprofit organizations as well as the citizenry (Department of Homeland Security [DHS], 2008).

The task for the public administrators and leaders of local, state, and federal agencies is to respond to a disaster, whether man-made or natural, in ways that protect and preserve lives and property. In most instances, it is the local authorities that are the first responders. When the mission is local in nature, federalizing emergency operations makes no sense. In most states, county governments are responsible for coordinating the emergency response operations. Some major cities have their own emergency operations centers as well. However, major man-made or natural disasters easily overwhelm the resources and capabilities of local governments. Most of the time local governments rely on assistance from state governments, whereas other man-made or natural disasters might require the federal government's intervention as well. NRF establishes a comprehensive, all-hazards approach to enhance the ability of the United States to manage domestic incidents. This plan places a strong emphasis on coordination and integration of capabilities at all levels of government, private organizations, nonprofit organizations, and individual citizens. Local governments play an important role as the plan calls for handling all incidents at the lowest possible organizational and jurisdictional level. To properly support local governments, there must be a variety of coordination mechanisms that link local responses to federal capabilities for intelligence gathering and incidence response. NRF also includes several key concepts, all of which require sound attention to management: threat assessment strategies, incident reporting, vertical and horizontal communication and information sharing, training and exercising, mitigation strategies, organizing and planning to mobilize resources at different levels, response and recovery activities, safety of personnel and the population, and hazard-specific components of the above.

Particularly, in times of turmoil or disaster we look toward the leaders in government. Most of us in our everyday activities think little about leadership by public officials. We expect our public offices to run smoothly, and most of them do. It would be interesting to contrast the example of public leadership during 2004 hurricane season in Florida versus the leadership (at all levels of government) during Hurricane Katrina. On one hand we saw a calm individual speaking clearly and consistently to an entire state in two different languages when it was necessary. On the other we saw what seemed to be an often disheveled and lost leadership that seemed to be more concerned with shifting the blame for their poor decision making and lack of a cohesive plan to others. This seemed especially true of officials in Louisiana.

Leadership is crucial in times of extreme situations or catastrophes. Such situations can produce multiple outcomes. Often these outcomes are predicated on the quality of previous planning and the ability to act on those plans. The reality is that good leadership may not be a big rating grabber, but it is exactly the thing that allows us to muddle through our days even in the midst of extreme peril and fear. However, the focus is almost always on those instances of poor leadership in response to disasters. Maybe it is because "examples of especially good performance are less visible, at least to the public at large, because their very success reduces their visibility and newsworthiness" (Kapucu & Van Wart, 2008, p. 2).

Crisis and disaster management does take a special set of leadership characteristics to at least have a chance at success. The special set of leadership characteristics include "decisiveness, flexibility, informing, problem solving, managing change and creativity, personnel planning, motivating, building and managing teams, scanning the environment, strategic planning, networking and partnering, and organizational-level decision making" (Kapucu & Van Wart 2008, pp. 4-5). At first glance this list may seem large, almost too large for one person, and it probably is. But another very important trait for leaders is to recognize that most often they are not alone. They often have scores of people around them who are ready and able to act if responsibility is delegated to them. The crucial need is for public leadership with the courage to give general direction with appropriate delegation of responsibility. Disasters cannot be micromanaged by leaders who are primarily concerned with their image. It is also important to make sure the resources have been shared and used effectively.

Leaders must exercise their leadership not only during or after disasters but also before disasters strike. It is very important for the local communities to be involved in capacity building, especially at the lowest level, because the local communities are inevitably the first and primary parties responsible for

dealing with disasters. Capacity building is a key element to preparedness and mitigation. It gets people thinking about what could happen and helps them to be prepared for when it does. For leaders, it requires many of the skills listed above, such as personnel planning, scanning the environment, and motivating and informing to name a few.

It was not just the local governments that were challenged during Katrina. The size and scope of the storm meant the federal government had to play a big role in response and recovery operations. One significant aspect of federal involvement was the change in the focus and scope of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) that had occurred with its placement within the DHS. Within DHS, FEMA had become more focused on man-made disasters (such as terrorist threats) and had moved away from the all-hazards perspective of emergency and disaster management. This limited its ability to scan the environment correctly and diminished the flexibility of the federal government in offering assistance before, during, or after the storm. Coordination and team building, based on trust between different levels of government, is critical and very hard to achieve during disaster response. The DHS established the Office of State and Local Government Coordination and Preparedness to simplify and improve the coordination of funding to the states and territories.

Cross-sector governance is needed across the public, nonprofit, and private organizations involved in catastrophic disasters. Cross-sector governance can be defined as “partnerships involving government, business, nonprofits and philanthropies, communities, and/or the public as a whole” (Simo & Bies, 2007, p. 125). Once an effective disaster management network is established across all sectors, the preparedness and response to catastrophic disasters will be much more efficient and effective. Cross-sector partnerships could effectively increase the amount of resources needed in response to catastrophic disasters. Catastrophic disasters and extreme events have occurred in the past and will probably occur in the future. To effectively manage these extreme events and catastrophic disasters, effective leadership, communication, and cross-sector partnerships are necessary to help increase preparedness and develop more mitigation programs that will in turn yield an effective response and recovery. Building relationships and collaborating with other agencies will increase networking, allowing agencies to deal with multiple problems relating to emergency management. Response to a disaster or emergency community can be successful if capacity building has taken place that has developed in collaborating agencies a shared vision, a common understanding of the problem, leadership skills, and sustainable community involvement.

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Bio

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