‘HERO LEADERS’

Key leadership behaviours in the emergency and rescue services…

(…and what the business world

can learn from them.)

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INTRODUCTION

As someone who's been involved in business training, coaching and consultancy for 20 years, I've been working with a wide variety of companies in a range of sectors at all organisations levels for a long time.

Whilst every cohort of participants is different, and therefore every programme, course and training session is different, over time, certain patterns of behaviour start to emerge – these are consistent across ALL levels of an organisation, and in fact can also be seen in young people still in education.

In recent years one factor in particular has become more apparent. And it's to do with leadership.

First, various organisations' employee engagement surveys frequently register the opinion among staff that their leaders are not leading as robustly as they need them to.

Secondly, some leaders, in these uncertain economic times, are starting to panic and unwittingly display behaviours which are NOT conducive to their senior positions.

This led me to consider what leaders in REAL emergencies actually do, so I began to speak to leaders in a range of services where life-and-death situations are the day to day norm, namely the U.S. Army, the Royal National Lifeboat Institute, Strathclyde Fire Brigade, Air Traffic Control, and the Scottish Mountain Rescue Service

The purpose of this short report is to outline some of those critical leadership areas which are LESS obvious to those in the corporate sphere, under the core headings of

- Personal focus
- Focus on others
- Communication

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The PERSONAL FOCUS of Leaders in Crisis

"Bravery is not the absence of fear, it is the courage to face it and move on. I think you can reasonably predict who these people are by assessing their fundamental values and beliefs and selecting people who rate the needs of others over their own"

James – U.S. Armed Forces

Courage

One of the most obvious themes to emerge from speaking to ALL of the individuals who contributed to the research was the nature and direction of their focus, with personal courage emerging as a key theme.

Whilst it's easier to identify acts of courage when someone saves a life in dangerous circumstances, the underlying principles are rooted in a deep connection to core personal values…and these personal values are ones which place others in a position of importance, whether that's victims to be rescued, colleagues or bystanders.

Respondents spoke of the personal courage of their leaders, and indeed demonstrated in their responses considerable personal courage themselves.

They also indicated that personal values and conviction provided emotional resources into which they could tap when the going really got tough.

Ego

Unsurprisingly, personal egos within their leaders were seen as a negative factor…indeed, a dangerous one. One respondent highlighted a specific colleague who was considered to have a 'bit of an ego' and who was also known to have made poor decisions and underestimated or undervalued the knowledge and experience of those in his team.

In an emergency situation, this is not just a source of frustration, this indulgence in 'self' was considered somewhat reckless.

There's a strong sense of leaders in emergency situations being 'in the trenches' alongside their teams, even if for practical reasons, they are not actually taking part in the action of rescue. They are in leadership, but VERY closely involved with the team and not above it or exempt from team rules and dynamics.

Lack of ego also becomes important in complex and ongoing situations where the leadership role might pass from one person to another: a serious fire, for example, will be overseen by one incident commander who then passes control on to a colleague if the situation drags on, or indeed if the situation escalates, and a more senior fire officer needs to be handed the reins.

In these instances, the focus remains the saving of lives and damage limitation to property: there is no room for personal agendas that the leaders themselves may have.

Self awareness

Acute self awareness moment by moment was cited by most respondents as an important factor in leadership.

In response to the call to an emergency, one person spoke of the need to consciously tell yourself to 'slow down…drive carefully' and to be EXTREMELY mindful of the impact that emotion and adrenaline have over immediate actions.

All respondents spoke of the need to be very aware of when pressure and stress starts to build: in a fire situation, heat exhaustion can cause irrational behaviour, confusion and therefore poor decision making. At air traffic control, tiredness can lead to a lack of focus. Shifts are 1.5 hours long, with only 1 hour at the screens, and this reduces in high pressure situations.

On the mountainside, mental and physical fatigue can endanger lives – not only of the person being rescued, but also of other team members and the fatigued individual him/herself.

In all of these situations, mistakes cannot afford to be made. Soldiering on regardless is simply not an option.

Getting adequate rest is crucial especially as some emergency situations may continue for some time. Recognising signs of personal stress, acknowledging them and addressing them appropriately before stepping back into the forum is the norm.

In many rescue situations, this can mean handing over control to someone else, rather than run the risk of making poor (or potentially life-threatening) decisions through tiredness.

Far from being a sign of weakness, the ability to recognise the early signs of stress and fatigue and address them appropriately are seen as vital.

Judgement

Clearly, the ability to recognise when one is struggling to make quality decisions has a bearing on the quality of those decisions themselves.

Initially, leaders have to assess the risks and make a judgement call on the nature of the incident itself – is it a genuine emergency? Is it a hoax? Is it credible? If the situation is judged to be a) a genuine emergency and b) a potentially complex or dangerous situation, more investigation is undertaken to determine as many parameters as possible prior to commencing rescue operations…and of course this needs to be done immediately and quickly if lives are not to be lost.

Difficult decisions frequently have to be made: for example, at what point does a mountain rescue team call off a search for the night in the interests of the safety of the search team, whilst knowing that there is potentially someone in danger and/ or injured and facing the night alone on the mountainside?

Within the fire service, the level of risk that fire men and women take depends on the assessment of the incident itself: risks will be taken to save saveable lives, fewer risks might be taken to save saveable

property where lives are not at risk….but what constitutes a ‘saveable life’ ?

As an aside, leaders, employees and volunteers alike do not judge the victims they are trying to save during the rescue operation. The person who has set off up the mountain on a sunny day in shorts and flip-flops or the holidaymaker whose inflatable banana boat caught a current and got dragged 20 miles offshore are NOT berated at the scene. Once they are safe, well and stable, they may receive advice if lack of judgement, rather than an accident, was the cause of the incident.

Learning

A further factor that marks out leaders in emergency situations is their recognition of the constant need to learn.

Within the fire service, the development of new fabrics and materials in the construction of buildings and the design of furniture etc has an impact on the way in which fire behaves. Each incident informs the next, and crucially, processes and procedures are changed as knowledge develops and increases.

This point about learning and information gathering and DOING something with the knowledge gathered continues on a moment-by moment basis during the emergency incident itself, as we shall see in the section on communication.

The FOCUS ON OTHERS of Leaders in Crisis

"If you lose morale, you lose everything."

Matt – Royal National Lifeboat Institute

Heart

One of the questions put to respondents was 'where is your heart?' The responses indicated that their heart is in the moment, with the victim and with their colleagues who are at risk, as well as being tuned in to personal reserves of energy and alertness as outlined above.

Clearly whilst personal safety is an issue, it requires a particular mindset for someone to rush into a burning building or launch a boat into stormy seas, putting your own life at risk in order to save someone else's.

Trust

Trust of colleagues emerged as a critical factor in emergency rescue situations.

In some situations, the leader is working alongside team members – Air Traffic Control being a case in point, as is sea rescue, where everyone is quite literally in the same boat.

In other situations, the incident commander leading the proceedings may be nearby but not actually involved in the coal-face action of the rescue – the mountain rescue leader, for example, will be at the foot of the hill, and the incident commander at a fire will be stationed at a hastily established incident control area, rather than running into the flames with his / her teams.

In either case, leaders are still 'hands on' and very involved and are not seen as remote or removed from the heat of the action.

In both cases significant trust is placed in the knowledge and expertise of those carrying out individual tasks, whether that's steering a lifeboat through choppy waters, lowering a colleague down a cliff side to effect a rescue, or deciding in the moment how to manoeuvre round falling objects to carry someone to safety from a fire.

Inevitably, this trust of the leaders in the abilities of their teams – and their own ability to delegate responsibilities and decisions to them - leads to a sense of empowerment AND a sense of personal responsibility on every level for the outcome of the incident

Morale

In every instance, maintaining the morale of the team was cited as critically important, with one respondent stating explicitly that ‘low morale has a safety impact’.

The consensus was that if people have higher levels of morale, they will maintain their focus. If, by contrast, they feel that the situation is hopeless, motivation dips and focus is lost.

It is therefore vital that leaders in crisis situations maintain their own levels of motivation and morale and choose their words carefully, as non verbal signals of despair or irritation will be picked up by the teams, and potentially have a detrimental impact on their performance.

Maintaining morale is also vital when it comes to the rescue victims themselves. Without exception, leaders remain solution focused and provide hope for those who need it. The pilot of the passenger-filled 747 looking for somewhere to land because his destination airport is fog-bound must feel confident that a landing slot will be found before his fuel runs out. The person trapped on the mountainside needs to know that they are in safe hands until they can be air-lifted to hospital.

Significantly, even though a situation might be desperate, the expression of hope and the maintenance of morale remains an important factor.

Valuing and leveraging the knowledge of others

Leaders in emergency situations are heavily reliant on the knowledge and expertise of others.

For example, fire brigade volunteers might come from a range of backgrounds and the presence of an electrician, plumber, gas fitter etc at the scene of a fire can bring vital knowledge.

Similarly, mountain rescue volunteers might be shepherds, park rangers, gamekeepers or others who have a detailed knowledge of the landscape and terrain, engineers who know how to fix rescue vehicles if required and so on.

Critically, relevant knowledge, experience and skills gained OUTSIDE the immediate workplace and rescue environment are capitalised upon. For a leader to ignore this knowledge and impose his own - potentially less well informed – opinions is viewed as poor leadership.

It is taken as read that the person at the coal face will advise on a suitable course of action, and not solely respond to instructions from the incident commander. For example, an incident commander at the foot of the mountain won't necessarily be aware of a rock fall that impeded the progress of the rescue team on the hill: it's those team members on the hill who will have to decide exactly how to work round problems and effect a rescue...or indeed decide whether it is safe and viable to continue with the execution of the original plan.

In some instances, these in-the-trenches decisions may lead to heroic do-or-die situations where an individual decides in the moment on the best course of action.

This genuine two way flow of information is a significant factor in the communications styles of leaders in crisis.

The COMMUNICATION STYLE of Leaders in Crisis

"You have to sound like you know what you're talking about – be able to inspire others with your confidence"

Roger – Mountain Rescue Team

Chain of command

Before commencing my research, I assumed that the hierarchical nature of rescue situations had the biggest bearing on how leaders functioned effectively in a crisis or emergency environment.

Whilst it IS a factor, it should already be clear that it is certainly not the only one.

In all situations, the leaders have to maintain an overview of the whole situation, and potentially provide leadership for a range of different groups. For example, at a complex fire, the incident commander might be working with several fire crews from different stations, the police, the ambulance service, the media might become involved, and so on.

A sea rescue might involve not only the volunteers from the RNLI, but the Navy, the coastguard and onshore medical services.

This obviously requires a chain of command. However, what is interesting about this chain of command is the way in which it works.

Taking the fire service as an example, on arrival at the scene, a recce is quickly done to ascertain the extent of the incident. This will be based on reports of eye witnesses, the experience of the first fire-fighters on the scene, and in most cases, the incident commander viewing the situation at first hand in order to make a swift but accurate assessment.

On the basis of this, a plan of action is formed. The plan of action, as directed by the incident commander, is the plan of action that is followed.

Two way communication

However, this does not mean that he incident commander is dictating events from afar: clear two way channels of communication are established and there is a steady flow of live data information from the coal face…to which the incident commander must respond.

So, if a mountain rescue team discover that a vital river crossing has been blocked en route to their rescue victim, this will be reported back, and the incident leader at the foot of the hill may well have to change the plan of action, and communicate this to all parties on the mountainside quickly.

Lateral thinking and extremely quick problem solving is also crucial by way of response: if news reaches the Fire Service incident commander that water pressure is falling, he will have to think laterally to solve the problem before it becomes critical and fire hoses cease to function properly - by taking water from a local river or finding alternative water sources for example.

In a nutshell the leader responds to information and takes action as a result, devising an alternative plan to reach the same ends.

No information from the coal face of the incident is considered beneath their notice. All is considered in the light of the overall incident.

Confidence

Clearly in emergency situations, there is no time for communicating for the sake of it. As one respondent put it “Every conversation wastes time, so make it count. It has to”. Clarity, focus and succinctness are crucial.

In terms of the WAY in which leaders in crisis communicate: maintaining a confident demeanour was cited as important for two main reasons: to motivate and maintain morale of the teams, and to inspire confidence in the rescue victim.

Communication with the victim is also important in this context – rescuers do not talk about the victim as though they are not there – they introduce themselves and explain the situation and what is going to

happen, and they keep that person informed of everything that's going on. As one respondent pointed out "this is a real person – not a case study or a list of injuries".

At the very least, the rescue victim must feel that they are in safe hands, and all respondents indicated that their tone of voice in particular was important in conveying this. Most respondents spoke of the need to sound authoritative and calm people down with their voice in an emergency, even if they themselves are uncertain as to the outcome.

Vocal control was cited as particularly important in situations where leaders do not have the advantage of body language to communicate: air traffic control being a clear example. Here, an acute awareness of the impact of the voice, and a conscious effort to speak in an unhesitant and confident voice was important in maintaining, for example, the confidence and morale of the pilot flying six miles above the UK looking for a place to safely land his 350 passengers and crew.

Perhaps it comes as no surprise that what leaders say and the way that they say it have an impact in these situations. What may be surprising, though, is the extent of the impact that personal communications styles, particularly with regard to the voice, that came out of this short study.

….SO WHAT?

Following on from this research, a critical question is “What does this mean for leaders in a corporate sense?”

For each organisation the answer is likely to be different. However, I would suggest that there are avenues to explore, including:

- The principles and personal values of those in leadership, which provide ‘ballast’ in terms of difficulty – what are they and how robust are they?
- The self awareness of leaders: their personal focus versus their organisational focus
- Health and wellbeing, how this effects decision making, and how it is handled
- Learning: How are employee skills and learning gained OUTSIDE the organisation being utilised?
- Communications, and how valuable information is gathered from the coal face
- How is the communication style of leaders underlining or undermining key corporate messages?

Food for thought, perhaps…..

AND FINALLY…

For various reasons, the respondents in my study preferred to remain anonymous. I must, though, acknowledge and thank James, Matt , Paul, John and Roger for their help and input to this article.

If you’d like to explore leadership development by looking beyond the training room or online course and gaining fresh perspectives from outside your sector, do get in touch about our bespoke programmes.

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQWFlhjxhkE&t=9s