Background on Episode 1

At the intersection of disaster management and leadership studies, the Leadership During Crisis (LDC) Podcast series explores stories from leaders who have led through a complex crisis. In Episode 1, we focus on the fundamental role that individuals and communities play in their own response to crisis and disaster. We tell the stories of three leaders who each took action outside their normal roles to help their community understand and respond to the October 2017 wildfires in northern California. How did these leaders make sense of what was happening and what was needed? Why and how did they decide to act beyond what was expected?

Recommendation to Discussion Facilitator
This discussion guide includes information about human and community behavior in crisis and disaster, to include different forms of emergent behavior. As a companion to Episode 1 of the LDC Podcast, we recommend your group watch the brief documentary *BOATLIFT: An Untold Tale of 9/11 Resilience*, available on YouTube. The documentary concerns spontaneous, emergent behavior in support of evacuations following the 9/11 attacks. The discussion questions in this guide will address both the podcast (about the 2017 wildfires) and the documentary (about 9/11).

Facilitator Context

Human Behavior in Crises and Disasters
Scholars have robustly and repeatedly replaced false or exaggerated myths about human behavior in crisis with evidence-based observations about how communities and individuals actually respond. Rather than widespread panic, resulting in erratic behavior, or shock, resulting in paralysis, David McEntire summarizes that "people typically respond with logical and calm behavior. They often know what to do for themselves and others, and they react accordingly. […]. Rather than wait for emergency personnel to arrive at the scene, victims will often care for themselves and others."[1] Further, McEntire and others challenge the myth that widespread looting and other antisocial behavior are common following disaster; rather, such behavior is the exception and, in some cases, declines following a disaster event.[2] In her book, *A Paradise Built in Hell: the Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster,* Rebecca Solnit presents detailed case studies of communities who became *more* collaborative, altruistic, empathetic, and resourceful following disaster.[3]

The Concept of Emergent Behavior in Community and Individual Responses to Disaster
Also common during and following disaster is the observation of "emergent behavior." On a daily basis, communities and individuals live and work within complex social systems that, overtime, develop routinized behavior. Disasters not only create new needs, but present a disruption to existing systems, requiring existing structures, relationships, and functions to

evolve or new ones to emerge. At its core, emergence is self-directed, self-organizing behavior that, as McEntire and Thomas Drabek explain, is proportional to the "scope and magnitude of a disaster" and is a function of unmet demand, an inability of traditional structures to meet demands, and a community's own assumption of a responsibility to act.[4]

Based on emergent research summarized by Drabek and McEntire, we might best understand emergent behavior as occurring along two dimensions: the degree of change or newness in organization or structure, and the degree of change or newness in functions and activities. For example, when sisters Katria and Morgan O'Neil established an impromptu command center in a local church following a devastating tornado in their hometown, they took on both new functions and a new structure that evolved over time to meet community needs.[5] Following the 2017 northern California wildfires, the focus of LDC Episode 1, existing trade associations in the wine industry shifted their functions—but not necessarily their structures—to save threatened crops, cut fire lines, and obtain generators and fuel. We might argue that Chef José Andrés did not change his function—in cooking meals for people—but he did change his structure for mobile mass feeding following Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico.

These categories and examples are not exhaustive, but demonstrate the diverse ways in which emergent behavior may be observed. Scholars and practitioners have also observed common traits among emergent groups in attempting to understand how to better foster and leverage such behavior within communities. Some of these common traits include: fluid organizational composition with varying familiarity of members; flat hierarchies with ad-hoc decision-making structures; governing more by norms than formal rules; operations outside or intentionally circumventive of traditional authority; and coordination that is opportunistic.[6]

Opportunities and Challenges for Crisis/Emergency Management Leaders

Case history demonstrates that emergent behavior will occur following major disasters, and it cannot be controlled. Because it develops as a function of norms, cultures, and values among its members, attempted control by outside groups jeopardizes the very drivers of the behavior in the first place. Emergent phenomenon in all its forms presents opportunities for communities to meet more needs following a crisis, and perhaps to meet those needs more effectively through community-based solutions. Such behavior can also be a foundation for recovery.

Emergent behavior, however, can present challenges for traditional crisis and emergency managers. For actors more accustomed to clear roles and responsibilities, the common flat organizational structure and shifting membership of emergent groups may present coordination challenges. Multiple emergent actors may also lack the ability to efficiently use resources across their efforts, with potential duplication in some areas and unmet need in others. Further, emergent groups lack the official responsibility for public safety and security held by local and state government and may not have formal mechanisms of accountability. They may also choose to take on risky or dangerous behavior to help others, such as cutting fire line or rescuing individuals from flood water.

Discussion Questions

1. How did you observe the concept of "emergence" playing out in each case? How did individuals adapt their normal structures or functions to meet urgent needs?

2. What do you observe about the leadership structure of the groups responding to evacuation needs following the 9/11 attacks? Of the groups responding to the 2017 California wildfires? How did formal and informal networks evolve and interact?

3. Across the two cases, what do you observe about the individuals who decided to act beyond what was expected of them? Did anything surprise you about their decisions or actions? What characteristics do you observe among the emergent actors or groups as compared to more traditional emergency management organizations or responders?

4. What role do you think latent or local knowledge played in the ability for emergent behavior to occur in both cases?

5. What types of communication systems did the actors in these situations use to collaborate with one another? Did these systems exist prior to the disaster or did they emerge?

6. What challenges did the community leaders and emergent actors face? How did they overcome these challenges?

7. Would you consider any of the actions or behaviors of the community leaders and emergent actors risky? How could "official" emergency management organizations best foster helpful emergent behavior while not encouraging unnecessary risk? Are there any other take-aways from this case you believe should inform official emergency management responses in the future?

Resources

[1] McEntire, David. A. Chapter 3: Anticipating Human Behavior in Disasters – Myths, Exaggerations, and Realities. *Disaster Response and Recovery Strategies and Tactics for Resilience.* Wiley and Sons. 2015.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Solnit, Rebecca. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster.* Penguin Books. 2009.

[4] Drabek, Thomas and David McEntire. "Emergent Phenomenon and the Sociology of Disaster: Lessons, Trends, and Opportunities from the Research Literature." *Disaster Prevention and Management.* Vol. 12. No. 2. 2003.

[5] O'Neil, Katria and Morgan O'Neil. "How to Step Up in the Face of Disaster." *TEDTalk.* March 16, 2014.

[6] Drabek and McEntire. 2003.

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