
ADAPTIVE

LEADERSHIP

By Charles “Sid” Heal and John R. Engbeck

THE PROBLEM

On a warm summer day in 1992, Washington Park in South Central Los Angeles was busier than it had ever been. There was hardly room to walk as the entire south end was occupied by an estimated 800 gang members openly drinking beer and catcalling neighbors, pedestrians and passing motorists. They were conspicuously wearing their gang colors in the form of clothing and bandanas to identify their particular affiliation. Police kept their distance to avoid accidentally provoking an incident that could easily lead to a full-scale riot. This was a very real concern because one of the most violent riots in American history had just concluded and tensions remained extremely high.

Immediately after the 1992 Los Angeles riots, so-called “unity meetings” between historical enemies the Crips and the Bloods were being lauded by the news media and public officials as a harbinger of “peace for our time.” While local police remained skeptical, no one wished to be accused of jinxing the peace efforts. On this day, however, the actions of the gangs were intentionally inflammatory as the local community withdrew in fear and neighbors retreated into their houses, traffic avoided the area and businesses began taking down their signs and removing merchandise from windows and sidewalks. They had just experienced one riot and were mindful of what had to be done to protect themselves.

Experience had shown that a lack of intervention only emboldened the belligerents, resulting in increasingly provocative behaviors to draw attention and incite a response. Their expected reaction was undoubtedly a large police presence in full riot gear with accompanying media exposure. Later, gang spokesmen would deride law enforcement’s overreaction to “peaceful” attempts at reconciliation. Explanations to the contrary would be seen as suspect, and no witnesses would be forthcoming for fear of retaliation.

Tension and fears mounted as the obvious threats continued growing. The police lieutenant tasked with handling the incident found himself in what seemed an untenable situation, one which had not been covered in training or texts. The gangs were well aware of what worked and what didn’t, as well as the typical police solutions, and were anxious to win their war in the court of public opinion. Clearly, what was called for was a new approach, and this required a new way of thinking about the problem.

The lieutenant was not helpless, however. He was a seasoned veteran with a lot of domain-specific knowledge. Thus, although the specific circumstances were unique, the overall situation was not. In fact, he had a repertoire of similar experiences from which to draw upon and compare. He was familiar with the people, the terrain, the time, the weather, the support available and a host of other factors. More to the point, he was aware of what had not worked in the past. This knowledge established him as an expert in this particular situation and allowed him to quickly explore options that, if not predestined to succeed, then at least were not following the known pathways to failure.

Another factor that the lieutenant had in his favor was that the agency he worked for encouraged ingenuity, creativity and adaptability. Even the boldest leaders will avoid actions they know will result in punishment if they fail, and so this nurturing environment played a major supporting role in moving his thoughts and actions in different and sometimes unconventional directions. As he considered courses of action and mentally evaluated them, he explored relatively unafraid of failure. As long as his actions were reasonable, he could expect the support of his superiors.

The third factor is that he had been trained to recognize and adjust to changing circumstances. This ability to diagnose was particularly important because it provided

the power to avoid actions which have proven unproductive in the past while allowing more time to think and prepare for something different. Thus, the harsh time constraints that always accompany crises are somewhat alleviated when leaders are able to use time more effectively. Of note is that in the nourishing environment of a supportive administration, the initial training blossomed and grew, and so the lieutenant was not only endowed with ability and confidence but empowered with the authority to think and act outside the norm.

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

Among the many lessons learned in the war on terrorism has been that the best combat leaders think on their feet. They do not automatically respond with a by-the-book solution, but rather adapt their thinking and actions to better understand a situation and select a course of action that more precisely fits the problem. Understandably, the military services, especially the ground forces, wanted to understand and perpetuate what was clearly an advantage over traditional methods and began trying to understand why some combat leaders were more successful than others. Researchers discovered that in the chaos and confusion inherent in unpredictable environments, the most effective leaders were able to grasp the essence of a situation and devise innovative solutions that proved far more successful than might be expected from standard practices. These same revelations have been verified by researchers in the business world, resulting in a fresh outlook on what makes people innovative.

Like the military, confusing and high-stakes situations are not uncommon in law enforcement and there are no shelf-ready solutions. In many respects, the situation in which the lieutenant found himself is not unlike a combat situation. There is a great deal of uncertainty and no small amount of

Among the many lessons learned in the war on terrorism has been that the best combat leaders think on their feet. They do not automatically respond with a by-the-book solution...

risk. There are harsh time constraints and potentially severe consequences for acting in the wrong manner or failing to act at all. The presence of an adversary who is capable of independent thought and action complicates the problem still further. It would seem, then, that the lessons learned in the military discipline might be extrapolated for similar situations occurring in law enforcement.

Generically, the methodology of thinking and acting to surprising situations is referred to as *adaptive leadership*. This style of leadership involves the recruitment, training and nurturing of people to recognize and adapt to unfolding situations that do not readily conform to conventional solutions. It also includes the organizational investment of authorizing them

...confusing and high-stakes situations are not uncommon in law enforcement and there are no shelf-ready solutions.

to make mistakes. Without this, even the most creative people are stifled as they suppress ingenuity and innovation to achieve an acceptable solution in the eyes of the organization. No leader is perfect and no solution is failsafe. If they were, it would be easier to teach the solutions as a skill set and simply reapply them when necessary. Leadership, however, is far more amorphous and difficult to define. While singly the individual leadership characteristics have long been known, collectively they create an empowerment of adaptability that provides clear advantages over conventional managerial styles of leadership, especially in resolving crises.

In examining adaptability in leaders, three factors are apparent. The first is that a behavior change is central to the understanding. Even if it is effective, persisting in a course of action despite changes in circumstances is not adaptive. Second is that any change must be in response to some shift in circumstances. Changing solely for the sake of change itself is not adaptive. Finally, the change must be effective. It makes no sense to change something that makes things harder.

Researchers also noted that adaptability could be categorized into three predominate types. *Physical adaptability* describes personal abilities to adjust to tough environmental conditions, such as extreme heat or cold, winds, dust, smoke, snow, rain, fog, darkness and so forth. Of necessity, this means the person must be able to complete physically demanding tasks and includes attributes such as strength, stamina and flexibility. *Interpersonal adaptability* describes a person's abilities to accommodate other perspectives and emotions. While this often means compromise, it does not require it. Leaders who are sure of their decisions are also more resolute in insisting on a course of action. Interpersonal adaptability more closely describes a person's



No leader is perfect and no solution is failsafe. If they were, it would be easier to teach the solutions as a skill set and simply reapply them when necessary.



sincere attempts to understand the needs and motivations of other people. This tremendously reduces friction resulting from the strong personalities typically involved in decisions during crises. *Mental adaptability* is the third type and describes a person's abilities to envision alternatives and overcome obstacles. Of necessity, this also includes abilities in handling stress and accepting new ideas.

Those who are particularly adept at adaptive thinking also possess a lot of domain-specific knowledge, that is, knowledge in a particular discipline, function or subject. Naturally, someone who knows more about one thing than another gains abilities and expertise that is not available to rookies. Moreover, an expert in one subject is not necessarily an expert in others. No one expects a doctor to be a pilot, for example. What is just as interesting though, is that these same people are also aware of what they don't know. This encourages them to search for other experts for consultation and advice.

The researchers also noticed that along with knowledge in a particular subject, the best adaptive leaders had a wide range of knowledge and experiences. While not experts in all fields, they had some understanding of how things worked in other disciplines, what had happened in the past and an overall

view of the big picture. They were able to envision potentials and make mental comparisons. This allowed them to see opportunities and improvisations that were missed by persons of lesser experience. After-action reviews also revealed that they engaged in "deliberate practice" by mentally correcting actions they did not want to repeat in similar situations as well as thinking about other options in handling future problems.

ADAPTIVE DECISION-MAKING

A subset of adaptive leadership is *adaptive decision-making*. The concept of adaptive decision-making is best understood as the mental process of effectively reacting to a change in a situation. In the simplest terms, it refers to problem-solving. Studies of leaders who seem particularly adept in this area revealed two fundamental processes in

sequence. The first is that they have an existing pattern from training or experience — even if only remotely similar — upon which they can draw. They mentally compare the present problem with this existing mental image, which in turn provides insight and ideas of what might work. In other words, they have developed intuition. The second is that they don't accept an idea at face value but rather conduct a mental simulation which allows them to mentally compare and test their intuition with the present circumstances. This mental simulation includes an action sequence in which one state of affairs is transformed and compared with another. In this manner, effective adaptive decision-makers can be best understood as having thought the problem through further than others.

Whether leaders are adaptable, and to what extent, can be attributed nearly

Extreme hard use tools.

Enter the coupon code below to
RECEIVE 10% OFF!!!
orders of \$100 or more at sharpernow.com
CODE* : 96129e1b63

* Coupon code limited to 1 use per Customer. Offer valid until 1/31/13. Note that products shown above are not necessarily depicted to scale comparatively.

For more information, distribution & sales inquiries contact our exclusive USA dealer:

 **Dull Knife Terminator**
(800) 731 1340
www.sharpernow.com

HARDCORE
HARDWARE AUSTRALIA®

entirely to three factors, all of which are present in every instance. The first involves the personal traits and characteristics of a particular leader. Every leader has a unique combination of knowledge, experience, education, courage, skills, imagination, intuition, ingenuity, tact and other attributes. These work singly and in combination to inhibit or foster effective reactions. The second is the organizational rules, norms and culture that encourage or discourage adaptive behavior. Organizations that dogmatically punish failure are not conducive to experimentation or exploration. Understandably, leaders that emerge from this type of environment are reluctant to deviate from norms. The third is the extent that a person is trained to recognize and adjust to changing circumstances. This last factor is particularly important because of the implied potential

for increasing creativity, ingenuity and effectiveness by preparing people to lead in chaotic and ever-changing situations.

TRAINING ADAPTIVE LEADER METHODOLOGY

In attempting to transfer adaptable thinking to other leaders, both the U.S. Army and Marine Corps have initiated formal programs of instruction. As these programs have been instituted, the law enforcement community has also gradually become interested with at least one formal course developed and taught with the Baltimore Police Department. While some minor differences exist between the approaches, the predominate theme is to increase a student's knowledge by employing a type of mentorship in which experienced instructors assist students in effectively anticipating, recognizing and responding to changes in a situation.

Researchers learned that experience was at the core of the most effective adaptive leaders. Experience is necessary for developing intuition and so it quickly became apparent that developing experience would be critical for enhancing adaptability. Fortunately, experience is one of the few leadership factors that can be developed almost as easily in training as in real-life situations. This is probably because it relies entirely upon mental images, even in real life. Thus, training to mimic real life results in the same lessons learned. While students freely explore in the safety of a training exercise, they are unconsciously expanding their experience. Naturally, the closer a training scenario mimics a real one, the easier it is to make a comparison and draw insight. Even so, *any* experience has been shown to be a major advantage and some of the more effective and innovative solutions have

Truly Free Online Training



OBJECTIVE > RELIABLE > INTELLIGENCE

www.tactical-officer.com/NTOA
206.453.0353

been extrapolated from experiences that were only remotely similar to the one for which the solution was applied.

One condition in adaptive leader methodology training is that it frequently employs harsh time constraints. This duplicates the same conditions that are routinely encountered in real-life crises and imposes stress, which in return requires students to quickly identify alternatives and priorities. Because many problems are too complex to be easily solved within the time constraints, students must rely on guidance and advice from other experts, and so alliances and teamwork come into play, often crossing boundaries of agency or discipline. Likewise, when experts are of junior rank, delegation of authority becomes necessary. Using this mode of training, students are required to develop and employ a wide variety of coping skills and tactics to rapidly overcome obstacles. The closer these situations mimic actual situations in the future, the better the students will be able to deal with them.

The best format for instruction in adaptive leader methodology has proven to involve some form of interaction with students, especially discussions (both moderated and open), practical applications, decision-making exercises, games and free play exercises. Students must possess a great deal of knowledge of a situation before they are able to recognize deviations from the norms and are often experts in a particular field or discipline before attending these courses. The students are presented with a problem and engage in deliberate practice to identify a satisfactory resolution. During the evolution of a particular problem, scenario or exercise, the instructors are able to control the operational tempo by providing changes to a situation in the form of “injects” which mimic actual situations likely to be encountered in real life. These may be as simple as a weather change or as complex as a subtle, political influence. Regardless, students are expected to recognize the impact of the

change in the situation and respond appropriately. More importantly, instructors can provide a focus or challenge conventional thinking by asking questions and stating observations. Furthermore, the training can be designed to increase knowledge and abilities in a specific discipline, subject or field or emphasize a particular skill or ability, such as stress management, establishing priorities, recognizing a change, creating alliances or allocating resources.

A RESOLUTION

The police lieutenant in charge of the Los Angeles operation was fully familiar with what had happened in the past and was keenly aware that responding in the expected manner would only work in the gangs’ favor. Understanding the mission to be restoring peace and order to the community, he also realized the advantages of avoiding force, if possible. After confiding with a trusted sergeant, he turned his attention to briefing concerned senior executives, political officials and media representatives who wanted information.

The gang members noted the sprinklers coming on at the north end of the park with only mild interest. It was clear that the grass was well-watered, and in southern California that task is always done with sprinklers that usually run on a timer. The sprinklers were some distance away and of little consequence. As time passed, they noted the sequence was from north to south and they gradually crowded more tightly together to avoid getting wet. Eventually, there was no alternative but to move out of the park. The sidewalks and surface streets were not big enough to hold the large crowd, and many began walking away. Within an hour only a few stragglers remained.

Unbeknownst to the gang members, the sergeant had contacted a maintenance man at the park and was controlling the sprinklers from the park headquarters out of sight of the gangs.

To avoid alerting and agitating the gang, he had begun at some distance from the gathering to increase plausibility. The confrontation was averted.

The lieutenant’s solution was, of course, not the only possible solution. What would you do? //

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Charles “Sid” Heal is a retired commander with the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department and retired from the Marine Corps as a CWO-5 with four tours of combat in four different wars. He holds two graduate degrees in management and is the author of “Sound Doctrine: A Tactical Primer” and “Field Command,” both focusing on tactical science. He is currently serving as the NTOA’s section chair for Strategy Development and is the author of the “Tactical Concepts” column featured in *The Tactical Edge*.

John Engbeck, Ph.D. is a former deputy with the Sacramento County Probation Department, and served in both the USMC and U.S. Army during Desert Shield/Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom. He has been in the security and law enforcement industry since 1979. He is a published author whose focus of research has been innovation, learning and cooperation in police organizations and communities. He holds a doctorate degree in Human Services – Criminal Justice.

For those interested in further information on this subject, most of the material for this article has been gleaned from three sources:

- “Streetlights and Shadows: Searching for the Keys to Adaptive Decision Making” by Gary Klein (2011)
- “Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World” by Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky and Alexander Grashow (2009)
- “Developing Adaptive Proficiency in Special Forces Officers,” U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (2005) (PDF available online)