

Applying leadership theories to federal emergency



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In 2005 Hurricane Katrina, a category three hurricane arrived on the Eastern American seaboard. When it struck the city of New Orleans it left total devastation in its wake. Katrina displaced thousands of Americans and left the city of New Orleans almost completely flooded. In an effort to lessen the impact of the disaster the American federal government dispatched the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to manage the aftermath of the disaster. Unfortunately FEMA's response to the disaster was uncoordinated, slow and inflexible resulting in many lost lives. This organization's failure had many internal factors but one factor that many critics point to is a complete failure of leadership at the highest level within FEMA (Waugh & Streib, 2006) (CNN, 2006).). A crucial part of any organization is effective leadership as it aids in establishing direction for the organization and makes the organization as a whole more efficient. The academic field of Organization Behavior has developed many theories of leadership that can be applied to companies and organizations in order to create a more efficient and adaptive organizational leadership environment. Two theories of leadership used in Organization Behaviour are transformational and transactional leadership theory. This case study will apply transformational and transactional leadership theory to the leadership failure of FEMA during this disaster.

This case study will outline the history of FEMA in relation to the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans. In doing this it will outline the lead up and aftermath to the disaster and the leadership failures that occurred. This will be followed by a description of both transactional and transformational leadership theories. This section will describe the aspects of both theories

and how they describe effective leadership. The third section will apply the previously mentioned theories to FEMA's leadership to frame the successes and failures of FEMA's leadership. Finally, recommendations will be made on how FEMA can create a more effective leadership using transactional and transformational leadership theories.

Emergency management was split among many different agencies, both in the state and federal governments, before the creation of FEMA. This created a situation where disaster response was uncoordinated and poorly lead. In 1979 the United States federal government created FEMA in order to integrate emergency management into a central agency (U. S. House of Representatives, 2006). The role of FEMA is to," [...] [coordinate] the federal government's role in preparing for, preventing, mitigating the effects of, responding to, and recovering from all domestic disasters, whether natural or man-made, including acts of terror." (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2009) After the events of September 11th the federal government integrated FEMA into the newly established Department of Homeland Security in order to provide a more comprehensive response to any type of disaster that struck the U. S. This organization of agencies created a situation where FEMA was overseen and funded directly by the Department of Homeland Security (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2009).

In 2003 Michael Brown was appointed as director of FEMA by President George W. Bush. At the time it was hotly debated, by the US media, whether Brown should have been appointed as director as he did not have a adequate background in disaster management (Fonda & Healy, 2005). When Hurricane Katrina struck, FEMA was generally unprepared for the scale of the

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emergency that was going to take place. Brown and the other leaders of FEMA failed to provide effective leadership during the disaster. Kapucu and Van Wart (2008) did a comprehensive analysis of leadership failures during Hurricane Katrina and put these failures into five categories: Failures in prevention and planning, Failure to adapt and expand capacity, Failure to restore communications rapidly, Inflexible decision making, and Weak coordination and lack of goodwill (Kapucu & Van Wart, 2008) Kapucu and Van Wart argue that it was FEMA's static leadership style and lack of dynamic leadership practices that lead to the magnitude of the disastrous outcome of Hurricane Katrina. This case study will now discuss transformational and transactional leadership; two Organizational Behaviour leadership theories that best describe the problems and remedies of FEMA's leadership failures.

Canadian Organization Behavior (2009) defines leadership as, " Influencing, motivating, and enabling others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members." (p. 284). Many leadership theories contribute to the above definition, however, the organizational behavior aspects of this paper will focus on transformational and transactional leadership.

Gregory A. Aarons Ph. D., University of California, writes " Transformational leadership inspires and motivates followers, whereas transactional leadership is based more on reinforcement and exchanges" (Aarons, 2006, pp 1162). Transactional leaders are generally identified with a typical management style that Canadian Organizational Behaviour (2009) simply refers to as " managing" (McShane & Steen, 2009, pp 294). Also,

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The transactional leader often uses management by exception, working on the principle that if something is operating to defined (and hence expected) performance then it does not need attention. Exceptions to expectation require praise and reward for exceeding expectation, whilst some kind of corrective action is applied for performance below expectation. (Changing Minds. org, 2009).

Whereas Aarons (2006) writes, “ transformational leadership requires moving away from the status quo and ensuring the organization as a whole is accepting to the changes, transactional leaders set targets and reward employees who reach the targets” (Aarons, 2006, pp 1163). One issue Aarons (2006) states is, employees who work under transactional leaders do not need to be creative because it is not part of their job (pp. 1163). This could result in lower motivation because of the lack of autonomy.

Canadian Organization Behaviour (2009) defines the four elements of transformational leadership as, “ creating a strategic vision, communicating the vision, modeling the vision, and building commitment toward the vision” (p. 295). With reference to creating a strategic vision and building commitment toward the vision Piccolo and Colquitt (2006) state, transformational leaders build visual models with follower’s viewpoint in mind; this allows for a smoother transition and sustained loyalty throughout the changes (pp. 327). Also, research has shown that transformational leaders are open minded and provide effective feedback; they also encourage followers to do the same (Piccolo, & Colquitt, 2006). Employees who feel they have high job autonomy and receive proper feedback feel more satisfaction in their jobs, which leads to benefits in the organization

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through work effectiveness (McShane & Steen, 2009). Positive employee/organization outcomes are attributed to critical psychological states as shown in the job characteristics model (McShane & Steen, 2009, pp 141).

Canadian Organization Behaviour (2009) describes communicating the vision as follows, “ Transformational leaders communicate meaning and elevate the importance of the visionary goal to employees” (p. 296). Canadian Organizational Behaviour (2009) defines role perception as the employees understanding of duties and as a contingency to employee behavior and results (McShane, & Steen, 2009, p. 27). This explains why it is vital for transformational leaders to properly communicate and incorporate with their employees in a vision. Trust is built during changes and it strengthens the commitment from everyone involved; leaders are looked upon by all of their followers, therefore, they must model their vision or “ walk the talk” (McShane, & Steen, 2009, pp. 296) Transactional leaders are deemed successful by reaching targets in static situations while successful transformational leaders reach targets through dynamic changes in the organization at the appropriate time. In *The Future of Leadership in Organizations*, Bass (2000) says,

Since its inception, research has demonstrated the utility of transformational leadership for increasing organizational satisfaction, commitment, and effectiveness, as well as the increased understanding of the dynamics of transformational leadership. There is a good fit of transformational leadership with the needs of leadership in the learning organization. But leadership can also be transactional. The good leader of the learning

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organization will be both but more transformational and less transactional. (Bass, 2000, p. 5).

We will now use FEMA as our research object, and focus on its leadership behavior during Hurricane Katrina. In this disaster FEMA failed on its responsibilities of minimizing the impact of the disaster and the management of its aftermath. We will analyze this situation using both transactional and transformational leadership.

In the terms of transactional leadership, FEMA made following failures. First, it's leaders failed in both prevention and planning of the disaster. Leaders failed to appropriately demonstrate these capabilities both prior to the hurricane reaching land and during the immediate aftermath of the disaster. (Kapucu & Van Wart, 2008) Second, FEMA lacked reward support which is a typical motivational way in transactional leadership (Changing Minds. org, 2009). Recently, with the emphasis on terrorism, the use of federal funds was restricted and focused on terrorism, while ignoring other forms of disaster. This made it difficult for FEMA to influence its subordinates' performance by reward. The third problem is inflexible decision making. Catastrophes require leaders to be flexible decision makers, decisive, and able to empower local responders to problem solve; leaders must do this while effectively and jointly making good organizational/system decisions (Kapucu & Van Wart, 2008). FEMA continually failed to use an effective decision making strategy as situations rapidly changed throughout the hurricane disaster. For example, FEMA delayed its decision on a mandatory evacuation order until 19 hours before landfall. This terrible decision left

more than 100, 000 people in the city, which resulted in enormous loss of life and dangerous rescues. (Kapucu & Van Wart, 2008)

With regards to transformational leadership, FEMA was also unsuccessful. First, a good transformational leader is fully trusted by his followers. FEMA's leader, Michael Brown, lacked trust during the entire disaster. One example of this lack of trust took place in Jefferson's Parish. A state official claimed that FEMA officials had cut the communications lines to the county without notice. The official claimed he restored the lines and posted deputies to protect them from FEMA officials. In this instance, local officials did not trust FEMA's leadership's decisions and actively went against them. (NYT, September 5, 2005)

Second, a good transformational leader can confidently coordinate his/her followers and ensure adequate internal and external communication. Unfortunately, FEMA couldn't facilitate coordination or communication among different states and communities when this disaster arrived. This lack of coordination became apparent when New York Times (2005) reported, Governor Blanco of Louisiana refused to sign a bill proposed by the White House. This agreement sought to share the National Guard between federal and state authorities. FEMA and its leaders did not inform Governor Blanco of the bill's purpose and did not plan any coordination of resources; therefore, she refused to sign. (NYT, September 5, 2005).

As has been explained above, FEMA has failed in many aspects during the Hurricane Katrina Disaster. The majority of the failures were a result of this organization practicing almost exclusively transactional leadership practices,

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which was also practiced poorly. Emergency management response, due to its unpredictable nature and its ability to sever communication, requires leaders to predominately use transformational leadership practices. By using transformational leadership the organization could have better adapted to the changing situation during this emergency. We will now outline and recommend specific transformational leadership practices that would have, and will, solve the problems that FEMA encountered during Hurricane Katrina.

FEMA lacked planning in both the leading up to, and the aftermath, of the disaster. This was mostly a result of transactional leadership practices. FEMA's Under-director, Michael Brown, should have led the charge in the response to Katrina. Rather than stepping forwards and leading by example he remained on the sidelines, sending directions to subordinates while seeking a way out of his leadership position (CNN, 2005). A solution to this would be to have the director at the forefront of federal government's emergency response. This recommendation has already been implemented by the government. Mr. Brown has been forced to resign his position and a new leader, Mr. David Paulison, was appointed to replace him and to, "lead the charge" of FEMA (CNN, 2005).

FEMA applied a ridged decision-making theory. CNN. com reports that Mr. Brown sent e-mails just days after Katrina's wrath, stating he would "tweak" the federal response (CNN, 2005). If Michael Brown practiced transformational leadership he would have built trust in his employees and allowed quicker, and more flexible, decision-making. His poor leadership created a situation where some employees tried to fill the leadership vacuum

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that he left. This resulted in a situation where, “ Too often there were too many cooks in the kitchen, and because of that the response to Katrina was at times overdone, at times underdone. Too often, because everybody was in charge, nobody was in charge,” the committee said (CNN, 2005). If FEMA’s leaders build trust in themselves and trust their subordinates decisions, a more adaptive decision making style could be applied in future emergency.

There was no coordination within FEMA or between FEMA and other disaster management organizations. “ Much of the intergovernmental bickering was caused by federal officials’ concerns about local competence and local officials’ concern about a federal takeover and sidelining of local input.”

(Making Matters Worse, 2008). This lack of agreeableness and political nonsense was poorly timed. Technological advancements have allowed for video conferencing worldwide; if Mr. Brown was open minded and had taken a transformational leadership approach he could have effectively communicated with his own employees and the other emergency organizations from anywhere in the country. By taking this approach and opening the communication lines to the people involved, Mr. Brown and the directors of other disaster management organizations could have discussed and formed an agreement to cooperatively deal with the problems at hand.

Once the disaster management organizations were communicating properly and working toward a common goal Mr. Brown could have taken steps towards the major and final flaw that needs to be remedied, FEMA’s lack of vision. As described above, Canadian Organization Behaviour (2009) defines the four elements of transformational leadership as, “ creating a strategic vision, communicating the vision, modeling the vision, and building

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commitment toward the vision” (p. 295). If Mr. Brown followed the four elements of transformational leadership he would have created and effectively communicated his vision to everyone involved in emergency management. As the leader of FEMA, Michael Brown should have been open minded and built a strategic vision incorporating the skills and assets of the many emergency management organizations involved in Katrina’s disaster relief. For example, Mr. Brown could have taken it upon himself to show not only the strengths but the weaknesses of FEMA and found solutions by collaborating with other emergency management organizations. Had Michael Brown followed the four elements of transformational leadership he would have become a stronger leader in FEMA, and a communal leader of the participating emergency management organization, thereby bringing quicker relief to the people affected by Hurricane Katrina.

Hurricane Katrina was a horrible disaster that ruined thousands of people’s lives and devastated many west coast American cities. The seriousness of this disaster was only exacerbated by the poor response of FEMA, the organization responsible for lessening the impact of such disasters. One of the major components of FEMA’s failure was its poor leadership practices. Transactional and transformational leadership are two popular forms of leadership that provide a good analysis of the above events. FEMA practiced primarily transactional leadership, where leaders participated in daily decision making that was programmed and ridged. The rapidly changing nature of disasters required transformational leadership where leaders are able to adapt to an ever changing environment, motivate employee’s to make good decisions, provide the organization with a vision that all can

follow and inspire trust in themselves by the employees under them. What became clear after the failed Hurricane Katrina response was FEMA's need to adopt transformational leadership practices in order to provide adequate response to disasters. By incorporating a leadership perspective that allows rapid and non-programmed response FEMA can become an effective emergency management agency.