

Meta-Leadership Lessons from the 2008 Democratic National Convention

An NPLI Case History

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National Preparedness Leadership Initiative

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Meta-Leadership: 2008 DNC



The delegate roll call at the 2008 Democratic National Convention (Photo: Wikipedia Commons).

Background

In August 2008, the Democratic National Committee held its Presidential nominating convention in Denver, Colorado. Five NPLI participants were involved in activities related to the convention: Christopher Lindley, Director of Preparedness for the Colorado Department of Public Health (Cohort V); Mike Nugent, Manager of Transportation Safety for the Colorado Department of Transportation (Cohort VII); Pam Pfeiffer, then Executive Director of the Colorado Emergency Preparedness Partnership (Cohort IV); James Robinson, Chief of Operations for Denver Health and Hospital Authority Emergency Medical Services (EMS) - Paramedic Division (Cohort VI); and Ellis Stanley who served as Director of DNC Planning for the city of Denver (Cohort II). This Case History is based on interviews with Nugent, Pfeiffer, Robinson, and Stanley and thus reflects a state and local perspective on the event.

The convention was designated a National Special Security Event (NSSE) and was held in

the Pepsi Center in Denver. An NSSE is designated by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) when a major event is thought to have a high potential for a terrorist attack or other security incident. The designation puts the Secret Service in charge of overall event security.

Aligning Planning Frameworks

While the Secret Service is in charge of an NSSE, its planning framework for this event did not mirror that of the National Response Framework (NRF) which formed the basis of the organization and planning by state and local agencies. Officials explained that the Secret Service focuses on incident prevention, not response to an incident. The Secret Service assumes that NRF will govern response efforts, though state and local officials wished this dichotomy was clarified at beginning of the preparation process.

State and local officials also expressed a desire for the federal agencies to proactively provide templates, expertise, and data for planning analysis around hospital capacity, blast impact, and other critical topics. "This would help us be more effective in efficient," said one. "Instead, it felt like we first had to attempt this complex analytical work on our own and 'cry uncle' before we could get help." Understanding this need allows a meta-leader to catalyze sharing of information early in the process.

Ellis Stanley noted that he developed what he felt was a "great relationship" with the Secret Service. He said, "Don't be intimidated – just go up and introduce yourself."

According to our interviewees, one of the most beneficial planning activities was a weekly meeting of Emergency Support Function 8 (ESF8 in the NRF) agencies. This regular, inclusive meeting greatly facilitated collaboration and provided a venue for building connectivity between leaders and agencies.

One of Stanley's charges was uniting all of the city's departments to work collaboratively. He said that he made a point of bringing together the operational people as well the senior leadership. "Never be afraid to pull up another chair to the table. One of the benefits of deep collaboration is cross-pollination "across lanes" that serves as protection in case any single department is unable to respond in a pinch."

Understand Local Structure

The Secret Service planning structure did not include a medical sub-committee. Instead, medical issues fell under the purview of the Fire, Life, Safety, and Hazardous Materials sub-committee because the Secret Service template is based on the structure in the District of Columbia (where the most NSSEs occur) where the fire service has jurisdiction over emergency medical services (EMS). In Denver, however, EMS stands alone. For future, events, interviewees recommended that "health" and "medical" be represented separately.

Additionally, Colorado is a "Home Rule" state, so a great deal of authority and resources resides at the local level. The major role of the state is planning, funding (through grants), and providing credentials. Denver city officials had to lead

across to surrounding towns and up to the state in order to coordinate activities. It is important for federal officials to understand the local system and how best to work with it. Meta-leaders involved in a convention should understand how to leverage each of the dimensions of Meta-leadership across multiple levels of government in order to accomplish their unified missions.

So, too, should local agencies be prepared for surprises and avoid taking too much for granted in terms of outside support. "Plan like the event is happening today," said Robinson. "This will help you find gaps." For example, in the Denver area there were gaps in existing mutual aid agreements that had to be "fixed on the fly." Adding immediacy to the planning process "pushes you beyond your normal thought processes."

Stanley noted that he was an "outside guy" – not from Denver – and that it was critical for him to "get to know the place." He made a point of exploring the city even in his off hours.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

One of the innovations in the preparation for this convention was the development and operation of a first-of-its-kind Business Emergency Operations Center (BEOC). This secure, online command-and-control center allowed more than 80 organizations to share information, documents, photos, and tasks in real time. Through BEOC, government officials were linked to private sector organizations and individuals ranging from property managers and corporate security directors to the local Walmart and Starbucks.

The result was that the private sector was better informed and integrated into activities, allowing for alleviation of some burden from first responders and other government agencies.

The BEOC was used to notify property owners of protesters' movements. For example, through the BEOC the police could ask for a "block lock down" among businesses in response to protesters' movements. Law enforcement also could receive information from the private sector about what was happening "on the street," including requesting assistance and notification when private sector security found caches of protesters' supplies. This cross-sector coordination worked well, resulting in a higher-than-expected level of inbound information received from the private sector, according to Pfeiffer.

When the venue for Barack Obama's acceptance speech was moved from the Pepsi Center (capacity 20,000) to Invesco Field (capacity 85,000), government agencies were able to reach out to retail participants through the BEOC and quickly procure more than 60,000 bottles of water for those waiting in what grew to an almost six-mile long line admission.

Private sector needs go beyond security. For example, it was critical for businesses to have sufficient information to coordinate deliveries. They fully expect to be "open for business" during such an event. Involvement of all sectors early in the planning process is key to building sufficient connectivity. We were told that some key partners in the downtown area did not have information about plans until two months prior to the event. This is too late.

Collaboration with the health care sector presented its own challenges. Denver is a highly competitive health care market and preparedness for the convention required organizations that compete with each other under normal circumstances find ways to collaborate. In the case of a mass casualty event, these independent facilities would have to function as an integrated whole. "It took a bit of work but community spirit won the day in the end," said one interviewee. "It was helpful that there was not a financial component to the preparedness. With no money on the table, people found it easier to cooperate."

Money, Money, Money

Crucial to success is an initial understanding by all agency leaders of how convention funding works. The funds are focused on the security mission capability and cover only a portion of what is needed for a successful convention. The local jurisdictions take responsibility for the planning and execution of non-security related responsibilities. Armed with this knowledge at the beginning of the planning process, meta-leaders will need to coordinate activities and resource allocation across entities to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Political officials sometimes make commitments in the process of securing the convention that operating professionals later must determine how to deliver. The funding through the Department of Justice only covers security, and then only at the convention venue and other venues directly related to the event. "You have to understand which requests for Federal assets are reasonable," we were told. Some agencies tried to

fund regular capital expenditures with convention funds. However, these, along with other day-to-day activities for the convention must be funded through existing budgets.

Own Your Lane

Success requires that each agency collaborate and also that it “own its lane” – that is, utilize its expertise and authority to do its assigned job.

On the day that Senator Obama was to accept the nomination, a biomonitor tested positive for *Francisella tularensis*¹, a bacteria often carried by wildlife that can cause tularemia. This caused the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) to initiate its response plan for a BioWatch Actionable Result.

Federal convention teams might have responded with highly visible sampling teams in protective gear, something sure to attract media attention and alarm the public. Knowing that *tularensis* was common in the Denver area and that the sample in question had been collected in an area frequented by wildlife, the CDPHE instead recommended discrete initial sampling to be performed by its staff.

This second sample tested negative and, in the absence of any known threats of intentional release of a biological agent, all agencies were

able to stand down. Unnecessary panic was averted.

This assertive yet measured response by Chris Lindley and the CDPHE demonstrated Meta-leadership: the agency “owned its lane” and led up to the federal agencies as well as across to other state and local agencies in order to effectively and efficiently secure a potential threat.

Get Ready to be Flexible

Four weeks before the convention, the Obama campaign decided to change hotels (despite the planning effort that been invested in the original hotel). For the preparedness team, rapid adaptation was the only option.

Also, during the convention, activities changed so often that fresh credentials were needed daily. “We had to work it out on the fly,” one interviewee said.

When the venue for the acceptance speech was changed from indoor venue—the Pepsi Center—to an outdoor stadium—Invesco Field—rapid adaptation was again the only option. “It was hard to start all over again,” one of our interviewees told us. “What had taken a month before the event now had to be done in 30 minutes. This was only possible because we had established connectivity, trust, and confidence between agencies during the planning process.”

The dimensions of Meta-leadership can be used to get yourself and your team out of “the basement” when unexpected changes in plans create chaos. Use them to understand your own reactions, diagnose the situation, and then take

¹ For more on this incident, see the Colorado Association of Local Public Health Officials’ Emergency Preparedness Updates, Winter 2009, Vol. 5.

effective action up, down, and across the preparedness enterprise.

Other Important Ideas

Help Shape Scope

Federal officials will expect planning for a full range of possible incidents – from street protests to a nuclear detonation. While one cannot dismiss any of these concerns, a majority of the time Meta-leadership can allow resources to be directed to prepare for the incidents that are most likely to occur and those that will not cause total system collapse.

Pay Attention to Culture Issues

Organizational cultures vary from agency to agency and sector to sector. Law enforcement and intelligence agencies, for example, can be reticent to share information. The job of the meta-leader is to move beyond cultural comparisons to create cross-cultural norms that allow each agency to accomplish its mission.

Make No Assumptions about Technology

While state and local entities were using the same basic virtual EOC platform, they had different versions which resulted in difficulty communicating with each other. Meta-leaders should anticipate the need to establish connectivity in this area.

Involve the Attorneys Early

“You will be sued, so be ready,” said Stanley. Early involvement of attorneys to address civil rights, access, and other issues was instrumental

in getting favorable court rulings in last minute filings by outside groups. Stanley said that the courts appreciate when legal perspectives are part of the planning process.

Key Take-aways

- If planning frameworks seem misaligned, speak up. Proactive curiosity and intentional action rationalize the situation.
- Listen for difference. Local conditions will vary from standard plans. The sooner you identify variances and address them, the less likely you are to miss a critical gap.
- The situation won't read the plan. No matter prepared you are, events will likely play out differently than expected. Use the Meta-leadership framework and practice method to help prepare for each stage of execution and anticipate change.

About the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative

The NPLI, a joint program of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, was established in 2003 at the request of the federal government. The program conducts research on homeland security, emergency preparedness, public health and public safety leaders in times of crisis and change, turning lessons learned into an executive education curriculum, case studies and scholarship that highlight best practices.

About Meta-Leadership

The Meta-leadership framework and practice method is core to the NPLI's curriculum. The methodology has been developed and tested through years of field research, academic inquiry and real-time feedback from practitioners. It continues to evolve. "Graduates of the NPLI executive education program report that this framework has made a significant difference when applied in their real world problem solving and crisis response," said NPLI Founding Co-director Leonard Marcus. "They reach out to one another and coordinate their actions more pro-actively than they otherwise would have. This sort of Meta-leadership in a crisis or other major event has important public health impact, insofar as agencies are better able to serve the population and reduce the loss of life."

The Meta-leadership framework has three dimensions to teach leadership skills:

- 1) The Person of the Meta-Leader: self-knowledge, awareness, and discipline;
- 2) The Situation: discerning the context for leadership, what is happening and what to do about it;
- 3) Connectivity: fostering positive, productive relationships. Connectivity includes four key directions:
 - a) leading down the formal chain of command to subordinates - within one's chain of command - creating a cohesive high-performance team with a unified mission;
 - b) leading up to superiors, inspiring confidence and delivering on expectations; enabling and supporting good decisions and priority setting;
 - c) leading across to peers and intra-organizational units to foster collaboration and coordination within the same chain of command, which includes other departments, offices or professional groups within the same organization.
 - d) leading beyond to engage external entities, including affected agencies, the general public and the media to create unity of purpose and effort in large-scale response to complex events.

The Meta-leadership framework and vocabulary are commonly used across many homeland security, preparedness and response organizations. Faculty have conducted hundreds of training sessions, including executive education programs at Harvard, as well as on site programs at the White House, Departments of Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, Defense, Veterans Affairs, the CDC, Secret Service, FEMA Transportation Security Administration and numerous private sector organizations.