

# Meta-Leadership Lessons from the 2008 Iowa Floods

*An NPLI Case History*

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## Meta-Leadership: 2008 Iowa Floods



*Flooding in Davenport, Iowa, 2008.  
(Credit: lowaflood.com)*

### Background

The Iowa floods of 2008 were the fifth largest disaster in U.S. history up to that time.

Davenport, Iowa has nine miles of waterfront and, having chosen not to build a structural levee, is subject to periodic flooding. It is the only city of its size or larger without a permanent levee system (see Appendix A).

According to Craig Malin (NPLI Class Cohort III), City Administrator in Davenport, the city has a strong relationship with the river. One of their reasons not to have levees is to avoid cutting off Davenport citizens from “their” river.

### A Trust in Resilient People

Every other city along the Mississippi has told its people, “We have a levee to protect us. Don’t worry.” Davenport leadership view forgoing a levee system as a more adaptive, fiscally responsible, resilient, and practical approach.

Davenport’s approach is to put its faith in and focus its attention toward leadership and resilient people. The city’s flood plan is publicly available on the Web and constantly tweaked.

In a flood fight, 90% of the city’s personnel will be involved. Malin likes to hire “triathlete MacGyvers” because he feels that Davenport must be a “can do” city. “We trust in adequately resourced, well-trained, properly led personnel committed to the mission rather than a ‘thing’ like a levee. Once the ‘thing’ fails, it’s useless. People are more resilient. They’ll find a way to get the job done,” Malin said.

In other cities, structural levees have proven susceptible to failure. “‘Things’ fail – and are doing so with some regularity as climate change drives unprecedented weather conditions,” said Malin.

Relying on its mission-driven human resources in the face of an approaching flood, the city builds temporary earthen levees on River Drive. Accessing stockpiled dirt at the ready, personnel are primed to carry out this process as smoothly and quickly as possible to put the levee where they need it, when they need it – and then remove it when the waters recede. They have become adept at 3-D modeling so they can understand the effects of levying during different flood scenarios.

## Protecting Modern Woodman Park

Davenport is engaged in a bi-state brown field redevelopment program with Rock Island (across the river), to turn former industrial space into civic space. This River Renaissance project—with 95% green space and 5% preserved “classic old structures”—earned Davenport a 2010 Siemens Sustainable Community Award.

Of particular importance is Modern Woodmen Park, a circa 1931 ballpark that is now home to the Quad City River Bandits. The team lost its entire season in 2001 when the ballpark flooded. Rather than move the field, in 2004, the city and ballclub completed a \$14 million renovation. They included about \$1.5 million in flood protection systems that allow the park to become an island during a flood.

In the first 2008 flood, minor league baseball refused to play in the island ballpark because they felt the risk was too great. To prove the flood protection system would work and the park was suitable for play, the city organized a Little League tournament and local home run derby.

In the second 2008 flood, the city assumed all liability for flood protection so that the minor league would approve play. Malin felt that the stadium should serve as a city symbol and “didn’t want a flooded ballpark broadcast on CNN.” They had to work for around the clock for three straight days to get things ready.

In the midst of this, the city had its worst rainfall ever in a 4-hours period. Firefighters fought a downtown fire in waist deep water. A firefighter fell and was paralyzed. Regional flooding had closed Interstate 80 and prevented responders from bringing him to Iowa City and weather precluded flying him to Peoria. In the midst of the torrential lightning (that started the fire) and rain that created flash flooding on city streams (while the Mississippi continued to rise), the Fire Department managed to bring the injured firefighter (now retired on disability) to Peoria by ambulance.

The plan for the evening of the flood was to fill a gap in the sandbag levee protecting the front of the ballpark overnight, but public work crews were waylaid by flash flooding. Craig Malin pitched in to help the one worker who made it, because that was the only option by that point. Three fire fighters did arrive eventually and the work was finished. This all happened while they were unable to communicate with the rest of the city. Despite all of the challenges, the plan worked and the field was able to be used despite the floods. One newspaper headline credited Davenport with an “Unsinkable Spirit.”

## A Catalyst for Connectivity

The people in Davenport have a great knowledge of water and how to work with it as a result of their long history with the river and its propensity to flood. In addition to the longstanding connection to the river itself, during Hurricane Katrina, the city sent teams to New Orleans to assist in relief efforts, which helped to

build trust and loyalty that would prove useful during the 2008 floods.

“Floods always surprise you even though you know they are coming and what to expect,” said Malin. “100 year flood scenarios are quaint in this world. We see 300 year and 500 year floods fairly regularly in the world today.”

“Floods are the catalyst for year-round connectivity between departments and also link the city government to its citizens,” he concluded.

## Key Take-aways

- Just as knowing oneself is the first dimension of Meta-leadership for an individual, so too is it for a community. Davenport’s flood preparedness and response strategy is built on an understanding of community history and values.
- Population resilience is critical to response. Davenport has built this both by making people rather than “things” the lynchpin to their efforts and by ensuring that iconic structures
- such as Modern Woodmen Park are protected.
- Continuous connectivity among agencies and across sectors is both a critical process and beneficial output of intentional Meta-leadership

## ***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.