

Meta-Leadership Lessons from the 2008 Republican National Convention

An NPLI Case History

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National Preparedness Leadership Initiative

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Meta-Leadership: 2008 RNC



Vice Presidential nominee Sarah Palin addresses the convention (Photo: Wikipedia Commons).

Background

In September 2008, the Republican National Committee held its Presidential nominating convention in Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN. The convention was designated a National Special Security Event (NSSE) and was held in the Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul. 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.

Months earlier a team of NPLI students (NPLI Class Cohort III) undertook a project to identify and assist with resolving leadership challenges and security/safety gaps in the city's plan for hosting the event. This team was comprised of: David Beltz, Security Officer, Director of Security & Safety, Headquarters, Dept. of the Army; Thomas Crowley, Director, Security and Corporate Affairs, Office of Naval Intelligence; and

Lisa Dressler, Deputy Director for Emergency Preparedness, City of Minneapolis (she began the project as Public Works Interagency Coordinator, City of Minneapolis Public Works/Management Services and assumed her Deputy Director position in May, 2007).

The team met twice prior to the convention in Minneapolis with city and state officials involved with security and emergency preparedness. Mr. Beltz and Ms. Dressler also worked at the Minneapolis Multi-Departmental Coordination Center/Emergency Operations Center (MDCC/EOC) during the convention period.

Who's in Charge?

While the Secret Service is clearly in charge of an NSSE, there can be confusion about who has jurisdiction over ancillary events surrounding the event that are not officially part of it. Questions arise regarding protocol for various scenarios: Outside of the NSSE, what is the protocol for transporting dignitaries? Closing streets? Arresting protesters? In this case, it was determined that any ancillary event occurring that was not covered by the NSSE fell under the jurisdiction of the city where it occurred.

With large-scale events like this, jurisdictional issues will inevitably arise. It is critical to work them out in advance to avoid fractured lines of authority and responsibility during the event – especially, in this case, with the added complexity of having multiple host municipalities.

Finding the Security Balance

A large event like a national political convention is multiple events: a security event, a political event, a social event, and an economic event to name but a few.

Those charged with security naturally will focus most on security concerns, but also must understand that residents still have lives to live – and may be most concerned about “traffic events” resulting from convention security – and local businesses not only must continue to operate but also may be counting on a boost in sales with the influx of visitors.

These competing stakeholder interests call for skillful use of Meta-leadership Dimension Three leading connectivity, specifically leading across is informative here. Influence must be called upon as much as authority to achieve security objectives while also meeting the needs of diverse constituencies, each with their own expectations and priorities.

There may even be conflict between security plans and political reality. In the 2008 RNC, a contingent of local politicians advocated embracing protesters and providing water and food in the name of free speech and public health, while others were concerned with the potential for violence and property damage.. In order for satisfactory compromise to be reached, each side must feel that it has been heard.

Plan Early and Often

“If a particular entity, or group of entities, hasn’t been though an event of this scale or complexity before, it may under-plan. You cannot start coordinating too soon,” advised David Beltz.

To that end, the NPLI team identified major city, state, and federal stakeholders and encouraged that collaboration and planning begin immediately. “Don’t wait for an invitation to a meeting or for someone else to coordinate meetings,” Beltz said. “Get things moving.”



An EOC during the 2008 RNC.

Meetings like these allow the parties to work through the complexities of the major event and are likely to reveal contingencies not covered in individual agency or jurisdiction plans and protocols. At the RNC, for example, there were the challenges of moving delegates safely and securely back-and-forth between Minneapolis and St. Paul and handling protesters in multiple jurisdictions. There were also multiple communication and logistical considerations including understanding how existing mutual aid agreements would function during the NSSE.

Leveraging Multiple EOCs

With an event as large as a national political convention, multiple agencies will want to “stand up” their emergency operations centers. In this case, cities, counties and the state all activate their EOC. This was a positive exercise in that it provided an opportunity to live-test capabilities and because a single EOC might not have had the physical capacity to handle all entities involved in a national event.

In the case of an NSSE, the Secret Service will establish its own Multi-Agency Coordination Center (MACC). At the RNC, this facility lacked video conferencing capability, leading to reported feelings of isolation among those stationed there. Integrating technologies and effectively liaising between facilities is a constant challenge when multiple coordinating centers are involved. To avoid feelings of isolation and gaps in coverage, these multiple EOCs should be thought of as a single network with interdependencies and interactions strategically plotted and widely understood.

It is critical that the roles and expectations for each be clearly articulated and widely understood. Responsibilities and accountability must be clearly delineated and protocols for communication and resource allocation established to avoid confusion and missteps.

Each of the EOCs is likely to have its own way of working and even though there may be overlap in protocols and processes, it is important to establish a synchronized “battle rhythm” as early as possible.

Priority must be placed on ensuring that those in the various facilities know their roles and stay in their lanes.

Leading the Public

Among the most critical constituencies with which you must coordinate is the public – both because they need to know what to expect and what you expect of them and because they can be a valuable resource for you: they are the “first observers” and will be the first responders in the case of an incident. Incorporate them into your plans.

Do not forget communities with limited proficiency in English. For the RNC, officials used Emergency and Community Health Outreach (ECHO) partners to reach approximately 85% of these communities with messages in languages such as Spanish, Hmong, Somali, Lao, Vietnamese, Russian, Arabic, Oromo, and Khmer. Address cultural preferences in your communications.

Other Important Ideas

EOC Orientation

Make sure that everyone in the EOC is familiar with the technology that is deployed and aware of the location of other agencies within the facility. Make it clear what technology and supplies will be provided and what each respective agency is expected to bring. Think carefully through small details like parking and food – they will impact the evaluation of your management and leadership.

Negotiate Information Clearances in Advance
A major event like a convention brings together

two considerations that may be at odds: the involvement in the EOC of a wider range of parties than usual and law enforcement sensitivities. Establish in advance who has access to what information and structure briefings and dissemination plans accordingly.

Communication is Always Important

The City of Minneapolis Communications Department had several telephone check-ins every day, to keep all communication clear and consistent. Per Lisa Dressler, “this worked relatively well.”

Don't Learn Lessons the Hard Way

This report captures only Meta-leadership lessons learned. There are many operational lessons as well. Be in touch with officials in cities that have hosted similar events to the one you are planning and ask to review their plans, after-action reports, and other documentation. This will give you a head start on your own planning and may help you avoid missteps.

Key Take-aways

- Accountability is not always clear. Be sure to articulate “who’s in charge” not just for the main event but for all ancillary events to avoid confusion.
- You can’t plan too early. A national political convention is a unique event and will present challenges you have not encountered before. The earlier you begin to plan, the more time you’ll have to uncover all of the potential bumps in the road.
- The public must be led. That means understanding their expectations and being able to communicate on their terms (and in their languages).

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.