

Meta-Leadership Lessons from Tropical Storm Irene Vermont 2011

An NPLI Case History

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National Preparedness Leadership Initiative

*A Joint Program of the Division of Policy Translation and
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Meta-Leadership: Tropical Storm Irene



Flooding from Tropical Storm Irene in Brattleboro, VT (Credit: The Point FM)

Background

Several NPLI alumni were involved in the response to Tropical Storm Irene through their service in the Vermont National Guard. This report captures Meta-leadership lessons from this experience. Interviewed for this Case History were Brigadier General Dick Harris (Cohort IV), Colonel Terry Lambert (Cohort VII), Colonel John Boyd, Lieutenant Colonel Dwight DeCoster, and Major Jason Pelletier.

Tropical Storm Irene resulted from the remnants of Hurricane Irene, the first hurricane of the 2011 hurricane season in the United States. The storm affected much of the Caribbean and the east coast of the United States. It was only the second storm of its type in history to make a direct hit on Vermont.

In preparation for the storm, Governor Peter Shumlin declared a state of emergency on Saturday, August 27, 2011, the beginning of a long weekend. The main impact of the storm was

felt in Vermont late that evening and the following day.

Between five-and-eight inches of rain fell across much of the state with more than 11 inches falling in one area. The result was the flooding of almost every river and stream in the state. At least three people were killed and several towns were so isolated by flood waters and damage that supplies had to be brought to them by helicopter. Road travel was severely disrupted throughout the state; the cost of repairs to road infrastructure, including bridges, amounted to almost \$200 million.

About the Vermont National Guard and the Response

As in many states, the Vermont National Guard (VNG) has a small permanent staff; the vast majority of its force of approximately 4,000 is composed of part-time reservists who must be activated by the Governor or, more rarely, the Department of Defense before they can be deployed.

VNG supports Vermont Emergency Management (VEM) which is responsible for emergency response operations.

The VNG has four Quick Reaction Forces (QRFs) of 30 individuals that respond within four hours of notification. Their principal role is to provide security, initial road clearing, and other stabilizing functions. All four were activated by midday on 28th.

The QRFs are followed by Response Forces (RF). The VNG has three specialized RFs consisting of 50 to 100 personnel depending on their specialty and two larger RFs consisting of approximately 250 individuals designed for longer deployments. Beyond this, additional forces are drawn upon as needed.

Activation of the National Guard is complex: Some full-time staff are Active Guard Reserve, like Active Duty, but under different authorities; in most circumstances part time Guard personnel are on State Active Duty in a response. They may be paid by the state or the federal government depending upon the circumstances. If there are missions that fall outside the Guard's military capability, time must be allotted to acquire the capability from other Guard sources nationally or potentially from the Active Duty. Using Active Duty capabilities requires specific command authorities. There are conditions with each of these contingencies and corresponding implications that must be considered in the context of the needs and interests of the full range of stakeholders.

In the Vermont response, all but the full-time personnel were on State Active Duty although under Federal rules and served at Federal expense. Assets deployed from other states, such as helicopters, were on Federal status but considered to be on State Active Duty during the response. Thus, Vermont had to reimburse the state from which the equipment originated.

Confused? The examples above provide only a glimpse into the intricacies of utilizing the National Guard for disaster response. Herein lies the first Meta-leadership challenge: the demand for swift

action will be intense yet there is significant risk of unintended consequences if all relevant stakeholders do not take time to build a common vocabulary and understanding of the workings of the response system and chain of command.



Vermont National Guard personnel preparing relief supplies (Credit: Vermont National Guard)

On Sunday evening (Aug. 28), the State's Emergency Operations Center evacuated because of flooding in the area. The Center's functions were moved to the FEMA operations center in Burlington, which was still active from the response to Spring 2011 flooding.

On Monday and Tuesday (Aug. 29-30), VNG activity diverted to focus on refueling high water vehicles to be utilized in reaching isolated communities and to distributing commodities to those areas.

The most long-term mission for the VNG was to assist in road clearance and rebuilding. They supplied planning engineers to Vermont Emergency Management (VEM) for about 30 days.

The VNG did not act alone. Their work was supplemented through support from National Guard resources from Illinois, Maine, New York, Ohio, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Disaster Assistance Response Teams (DARTs) from outside of Vermont were described as a “huge asset.”

Meta-Leadership Lessons

Dimension One – The Person of the Meta-Leader

Most Guard personnel are part time forces that provide the nation superb capability. They are dedicated but must balance their commitments to their families and employers with their Guard mission. This is particularly true when the families and employers are affected by the emergency, too.

“It took a great deal of emotional intelligence to determine where to pull soldiers from and for how long,” said one senior leader. “Families and employees are supportive of Guard members but we have to be sensitive as well. We have some full-time members and we look to them first. We had time in advance of Irene to determine who would be around to help. As the response unfolded, Guard leaders tried to give balance whenever we have sufficient forces to allow it.”



Vermont National Guard personnel were involved in extensive road clearing and flood response. (Credit: Vermont National Guard)

Leaders must recognize their symbolic value. The Guard represents security and resilience to a community. Just seeing the trucks and uniformed personnel can help restore confidence in the face of adversity. Leaders must be intentional in projecting calm and self-assurance as both their troops and the community at large will mirror their behavior.

Dimension Two – The Situation

VNG deployed Key Leadership Engagement Teams to assess towns hit by the storm. Their job was to help build an operating picture through evaluation and analysis in conjunction with appropriate leadership.

Each day there was a 5 p.m. call with the town emergency managers. VEM was doing this in parallel yet getting different reports and information. The criteria and analysis were not consistent: assessment depended upon the individual with whom one spoke -- how things were at his house, on his road, etc. The VNG used skills deciphering “atmospherics” learned in Afghanistan and Iraq to try to develop a more accurate picture of what was actually happening. The State Police also conducted assessments that tended to corroborate the VNG findings.

“There is a need to better coordinate assessment activities,” said one interviewee. “It took about a week to get everyone into the field to see the damage firsthand. You couldn’t grasp how bad it was from watching television. You had to see it.”

Another interviewee commented that the work to refine situational awareness and a common

operating picture was constant. One challenge: once VNG began flowing data to the state agencies it outstripped the ability of those agencies to analyze it. Attention must be paid to calibrating both sides of this equation.

It must be assumed that the situation will change in ways which you may not anticipate. One example: news came that President Obama was considering a visit to see the damage from the storm caused a “security rush” that diverted personnel from other activities. The President ultimately cancelled the visit and sent FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate instead. The disruption, however, could not be undone. It was recommended by several interviewees that VIP visits be formally factored into response plans. One suggested that a special VIP security team be created as some high-profile visit is “inevitable” in an event of this scale.

Dimension Three: Leading Connectivity

Leading Down

Closely related to Dimension One were the challenges of leading down with a volunteer force drawn from the same area as the impact of the emergency. The VNG was fortunate in this case in that most of its personnel lived in the northern part of the state while the worst damage was in the southern counties.

The rapid organizational assessment undertaken in advance of Irene helped leaders understand who was most likely to be available. “Knowing this

upfront made it easier to manage,” said one interviewee.

As the response progressed, leaders kept track of response hours to minimize the number of personnel working extraordinarily long shifts. In an initial response, you must use whomever is available to get the job done; in a prolonged response, leaders must pace their people and resources. Showing that respect and loyalty down through the ranks reaps greater commitment back up.

Another lesson learned was that an event of Irene’s scale requires an involuntary call-up early to ensure that the proper skill sets are available and forces are not overworked: relying only on volunteers may provide enough bodies initially, but commanders need to be cognizant of work cycles and special training requirements.



*VNG relief efforts were multi-faceted
(Credit: Vermont National Guard)*

Further, running operations 24-hours per day requires not just people to perform specific functions but also additional planners to ensure that the “battle rhythm” that is necessary in the early days of a response.

A final lesson was to involve all staff sections in the response, including support functions, even if only through information sharing. Noted, “Everyone needs to feel that they are part of the effort.”

Leading Up

There was a new state administration in place but Irene was not the first time that the VNG had worked with the governor and his team. Vermont is subject to regular spring flooding from snow melt and spring rains. This earlier experience meant that relevant legal processes had been exercised and relationships built.

One interviewer commented, “With any new administration it is critical that relationships are formed immediately to ensure that all potential responders understand the procedures that are necessary to activate the Guard. Whenever there is a new member of the team, they must be briefed. You don’t want to be learning ‘on the fly’ in an emergency.”



Vermont’s roadways suffered extensive damage which complicated response and recovery efforts (Credit: Vermont National Guard)

Another interviewee noted is the importance of state officials not only knowing how to activate the

Guard, but also how to best utilize them. “We are a capabilities-based, mission driven organization. Give us a job to do and let us figure out how best to do it.” In this situation, VEM – the agency in charge – put forward one plan for commodities distribution by the Guard that they thought made sense, but the Guard saw an alternative plan that better used their resources. VNG presented its case and prevailed. “When coordinating efforts, each agency has to respect and leverage the expertise of the others. Communication is key.”

The VNG has built its relationship with VEM and other agencies over time. This has been a benefit of joint exercises around the Yankee nuclear power plant. “The State is the customer,” said one interviewee. “But sometimes you have to educate them just as they have to educate us.”

Leading Across

A major emergency such as that created by tropical storm Irene required “odd relationships”: non-doctrinal relationships between civilian, government, and NGO entities formed based on the situation. One interviewee commented, “It is tough – but essential – to keep your hands around the evolving structure and relationships.”

A large response should be viewed as a complex adaptive system: there will be interconnections and interdependencies not foreseen in formal plans. Nor will the event conform exactly to planning scenarios. In this case, Irene did not even track exactly as forecast. The ability to adapt and assemble these “odd relationships” may prove to be the difference between success and failure.

As noted above, the VNG was aided by personnel and resources from other states. They reflected on lesson learned in the need for joint reception staging and onward integration: you must be able to handle and take care of these out of state assets. It took some time to get this in place after Irene.

VNG leaders highlighted regional challenges presented by the state-by-state organizational nature of the Guard. Joint Task Forces (JTF) at the state level are excellent coordinating bodies, but there may be a need for regional JTFs to foster a more expansive coordinated effort.



Vermont National Guard personnel assess storm damage (Credit: Vermont National Guard)

Other Key Take-aways

- Monitor social media. VNG did not do this actively in the response to Irene. Doing so may have aided community assessment and allowed for better identification of immediate needs.
- Document lessons learned as the event progresses. “Tell it as it happens.” VNG uses an “in progress review” (IPR) as a vehicle for learning-while-doing. These can supplement and inform after action reviews (AARs).
- Intentionally lead transitions as they can be particularly treacherous. These come into play both as the response ramps up, levels off (especially during an extended response), and again as it winds down. Command structures may change such as when a JTF stands up, new personnel will become involved, and attitudes of the public and media will evolve. Meta-leaders must be attuned to the structural, psychological, and emotional inflection points that will mark transitions in the response. There will be implications across all three Meta-leadership dimensions that must be understood and addressed. Use the three-dimensional model to anticipate and manage these challenges.
- The VNG is an emergency force only. The goal is to transition to civilian entities as quickly yet seamlessly as possible. They never want to do a job that a local business could do and they should not impede the local economy.

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.