

# Meta-Leadership Lessons from the 2014-15 Civil Unrest in Ferguson, Missouri

## *An NPLI Case History*

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## Meta-Leadership: Ferguson 2014-15 Civil Unrest



*Rioting in Ferguson, MO in August 2014 (credit: Getty Images via Flickr Commons)*

### Background

On August 9, 2014, shortly after 12:00pm, an unarmed black teenager was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. The 18-year-old, Michael Brown, died at the scene; the officer, Darren Wilson was working for the Ferguson Police Department at the time. The event sparked significant protests,

civil unrest and violent standoffs between citizens, activists, and law enforcement.<sup>1</sup>

Protest activity lasted more than 20 consecutive days (and would continue sporadically across the region and nationally for the next 18 months).<sup>2</sup> The activity involved thousands of protestors and hundreds of first responders.

Over the course of several weeks, as protest participation, violent rhetoric and media attention increased, government leadership wrestled with the appropriate command and control of the incident.<sup>3</sup> While the Ferguson Police Department had initial ownership of the event, command was later transferred to the St. Louis County Police Department then, by order of the Governor, the State Highway Patrol, and then finally, back to St. Louis County.<sup>4</sup> With more than two dozen public Aug 14, 2014 our interviewees noted that these rapid and often ambiguous changes in command led to a lack of mission clarity, which led to a lack of moral and limited confidence in an overall strategy for limiting violence and arriving at a

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<sup>1</sup>Buchanan, L., Fessenden, F., Lai, K.K., Park, H., Palapiano, A... & Yourish, K. (2015, August 10). What happened in Ferguson? *New York Times*, Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/ferguson-missouri-town-under-siege-after-police-shooting.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Eligon, J. & Fernandez, M. (2014, November 24). In protests from Midwest to both coasts, fury boils over. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/25/us/frustration-months-in-the-making-boils-over-on-the-streets-of-ferguson.html?action=click&contentCollection=U.S.&region=Footer&module=WhatsNext&version=WhatsNext&contentID=WhatsNext&moduleDetail=undefined&pgtype=Multimedia>

<sup>3</sup> Rosenbaum, J. (2014, August 27). Who's in charge here? For Ferguson and St. Louis County Police, not elected officials. *St. Louis Public Radio*, Retrieved from <http://news.stlpublicradio.org/post/whos-charge-here-ferguson-and-st-louis-county-police-not-elected-officials#stream/0>

<sup>4</sup> McCabe, D. (2014, August 14). New Ferguson Police Commander Ron Johnson walks with protestors. *Huffington Post*, Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/14/ron-johnson-ferguson\\_n\\_5680351.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/14/ron-johnson-ferguson_n_5680351.html); Missouri troopers to take over Ferguson security (2014, August 14) *Springfield News*, Retrieved from <https://www.news-leader.com/story/news/local/ozarks/2014/08/14/missouri-troopers-to-take-over-ferguson-security/14071993/>

resolution.<sup>5</sup> Despite escalating tensions, major leadership challenges caused by the changes in command and control, and significant threats to the safety of law enforcement and local officials<sup>6</sup>, there were no civilian or first responder casualties and most injuries were relatively minor.<sup>7</sup>

A grand jury investigation that began in late August ended on November 24, 2014, with the grand jury deciding not to indict Officer Wilson. Additional large protests ensued following this decision, which turned violent and lasted for several days.<sup>8</sup> Officer Wilson resigned from the Ferguson police force on November 29<sup>th</sup>.<sup>9</sup> In September 2014, the Civil Rights Division of the

U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) opened an official investigation into the Ferguson justice system. The DOJ released a [report](#) in March 2015 that found, among other concerns, potential biases in policing and court practices, and longstanding distrust of police by Ferguson residents (an assertion disputed by Ferguson officials).<sup>10</sup>

On the anniversary of Michael Brown's death in 2015, peaceful protests again turned violent. A State of Emergency was declared and St. Louis County Police (by statutory authority) assumed control of policing operations to disperse the

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<sup>5</sup> Schwartz, J., Shear, M., & M. Paulson (2014, August 14). New tack on unrest eases tension in Missouri. *The New York Times*, Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/15/us/ferguson-missouri-police-shooting.html>; Staff Reports (2014, August 14). Day five wrap up: McCulloch blasts Nixon for replacing St. Louis County Police control. *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, Retrieved from [https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/gov-nixon-gives-police-control-of-ferguson-situation-to-missouri/article\\_0806541b-ed48-5d06-9267-323531ad6cf1.html](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/gov-nixon-gives-police-control-of-ferguson-situation-to-missouri/article_0806541b-ed48-5d06-9267-323531ad6cf1.html)

<sup>6</sup> Patrick, R. (2015, September 2). Two in Ferguson-related bomb plot sentenced to 7 years in prison. *St. Louis Dispatch*, Retrieved from [https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/two-in-ferguson-related-bomb-plot-sentenced-to-years-in/article\\_e853a196-d5c5-51c6-a9f0-580062329865.html](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/two-in-ferguson-related-bomb-plot-sentenced-to-years-in/article_e853a196-d5c5-51c6-a9f0-580062329865.html);

<sup>7</sup> Favre, G.J., Flynn, L.B & McNulty, E.J. (2018, April 23-24). Interviews of first responders during unrest following the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, Missouri. On file with the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative, Cambridge, MA. See also Alcindor, Y., Madhani, A., & Staglin, D. (2014, August 14). Hundreds of peaceful protesters march in Ferguson. *USA Today*, Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/08/14/ferguson-missouri-police-clashes-shooting-anonymous/14046707/>. Despite the size and duration of the protests, along with national media reporting mass destruction, the St. Louis Dispatch reported in

November 2014 low numbers of injury, no casualties, and that (while dozens of robberies occurred in the main protest area) only one building was burned. Kohler, J. (2014, November 22). Ferguson by the numbers: Breakdown since protests began. *St. Louis Dispatch*, Retrieved from [https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/ferguson-by-the-numbers-breakdown-since-protests-began/article\\_5ec448a4-3f08-5861-813c-d03bed1c9784.html](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/ferguson-by-the-numbers-breakdown-since-protests-began/article_5ec448a4-3f08-5861-813c-d03bed1c9784.html).

<sup>8</sup> Davey, M. & Bosman, J. (2014, November 24). Protests flare after Ferguson police officer is not indicted. *New York Times*, Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/25/us/ferguson-darren-wilson-shooting-michael-brown-grand-jury.html>

<sup>9</sup> Buchanan, et al., 2015; Brown, E. (2014, August 14). Timeline: Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, Mo. *USA Today*, Retrieved from

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/08/14/michael-brown-ferguson-missouri-timeline/14051827/>; Young, J. (2014, November 24). Michael Brown shooting, Ferguson fallout: Timeline. *Newsweek*,

Retrieved from <http://www.newsweek.com/michael-brown-shooting-ferguson-fallout-timeline-286756>; <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/08/14/michael-brown-ferguson-missouri-timeline/14051827/>

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, March 4, 2015. *Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department*. Retrieved from [https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson\\_police\\_department\\_report.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf).

crowd and quell the violence.<sup>11</sup> In 2016, the DOJ filed a civil rights lawsuit against the city alleging constitutional violations and asking for reform.<sup>12</sup> The lawsuit resulted in an agreed-upon consent decree that requires the implementation of various reforms to court and police practices, including an increase in community policing, additional training on use of force and bias-awareness, civilian oversight, officer support services, officer recruitment, and supervision.<sup>13</sup> Dealing with the aftermath of the DOJ report, lawsuit, and what has often appeared to be biased media coverage against police has posed ongoing challenges in within public safety ranks and in the court of public opinion, both in Missouri and across the country.<sup>14</sup> Since the unrest in Ferguson, there have been similar protests to officer-involved shootings in multiple states, including California, Illinois, Maryland, and North Carolina.<sup>15</sup>

In Spring 2018, in collaboration with several Missouri public safety agencies, NPLI researchers traveled to St. Louis to glean first-hand meta-leadership lessons from the men and women on

the ground during the 2014-15 civil unrest. The group of 20 de-identified first responders represented police officers, firefighters, and EMS professionals, and a member of the Missouri National Guard. Interviewees varied in age and experience, and held ranks across the spectrum, from entry level patrol officers and firefighters, to midline supervisors and chiefs of departments. Although one NPLI graduate involved in the response noted that prolonged civil unrest is “not business as usual across all three dimensions of meta-leadership” and unique obstacles were present, numerous key lessons learned through the challenging response to the events in Ferguson are informative for civil unrest and large incident preparedness.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Swaine, J. (2015, August 10). Ferguson protests: state of emergency declared after violent night. *The Guardian*, Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/aug/10/ferguson-protests-st-louis-state-of-emergency>

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, February 10, 2016. *Justice Department files lawsuit to bring constitutional policing to Ferguson, Missouri*. Retrieved from <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-files-lawsuit-bring-constitutional-policing-ferguson-missouri>.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, March 17, 2016. *Justice Department and City of Ferguson, Missouri resolve lawsuit with agreement to reform Ferguson Police Department and Municipal Court to ensure constitutional policing*. Retrieved from

<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-and-city-ferguson-missouri-resolve-lawsuit-agreement-reform-ferguson>

<sup>14</sup> Favre, et al., 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Skinner, C. (2016, July 7). Wave of anti-police protests strains U.S. law enforcement. *Reuters*, Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-police-protest-idUSKCN0ZN2OO>; Joseph, G. (2016, September 22). From Ferguson to Charlotte, why police protests turn into riots. *City Lab*, Retrieved from <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2016/09/from-ferguson-to-charlotte-why-police-protests-turn-into-riots/500981/>

<sup>16</sup> NB: the historical context and an extended discussion of social justice, criminal justice and other issues related to racial tension and socioeconomic challenges in Missouri (some of which is covered in the DOJ report) are beyond the scope of this case history.

# Meta-Leadership Lessons

## Dimension 1:

### The Person of the Meta-Leader

One critical lesson centered around accessibility of leaders, including front-line presence, and its impact on adaptability and situational awareness—not only of how the events themselves were unfolding or escalating, but also how the men and women under their command were responding, both tactically and on a personal level.<sup>17</sup>

#### Recommendation:

- *Be visible.* Many interviewees noted that they were inspired by and appreciative of leaders coming to the “front lines” to check on their teams or units. They expressed a sense of shared mission when leaders were visible during difficult moments. Conversely, rank-and-file members spoke of a lack of confidence in leaders who would only appear when it was time to brief media or elected officials. Though leaders cannot (and should not) spend *all* of their time close to the action, it’s critical to show up and be present to observe the response as it unfolds on the ground in order to understand the whole picture. “Showing

up” as leaders (of all ranks) is paramount to overall success of the objective.

- *Establish “commander’s intent” to foster both focus and autonomy.* Make clear over-arching objectives. Establish bi-directional feedback loops to keep senior leaders and the front lines connected—and will be willing to hear difficult “truth-to-power” reports of deviations between plans and reality.

#### Side Bar: Emotional Intelligence

Teachings on emotional intelligence are an important part of the NPLI Executive Education Program. Training crisis leaders and first responders in this area, particularly when considering the reactive nature of a response to a violent protest, can lead toward better understanding of individual ability to regulate emotional response to crisis and to recognize the mental and emotional challenges faced by first responders during this kind of event. The components of Emotional Intelligence are:

1. Self-awareness
2. Self-regulation
3. Empathy
4. Motivation
5. Social skills

See Goleman, D. (2006). *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York, NY: Bantam Dell; *see also* McNulty, E.J., Dorn, B.C., Serino, R., Goralnick, E., Grimes, J.O., Flynn, L.B., Pillay, S.S. and Marcus, L.J. (2018), Integrating Brain Science into Crisis Leadership Development. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 11: 7-20. doi:10.1002/jls.21548.

Visibility extends beyond the front lines. Leaders should be prepared to spend time with community stakeholders, elected officials, protest leaders and the media. Accessibility and attentiveness will

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<sup>17</sup> Favre, et al., 2018.

help establish a collaborative command presence in many facets of the event.

The physical, mental and emotional toll on first responders and the community during the prolonged unrest tested the resilience of even seasoned law enforcement veterans. In many cases, photo journalists captured images that show protestors only inches from police officers.<sup>18</sup> Often working in exceedingly close proximity to protestors, interviewees described being confronted with verbal and physical threats, assault with bricks, prolonged gunfire, and threats to family members throughout the protest. Responders were on the front lines for days at a time, often without sufficient breaks from the action due to resource limitations. Police officers and commanders working the “skirmish lines” had little training on civil unrest policies and procedures.

Some interviewees reported that first responders with combat experience appeared to have more robust training preparation for sustained deployment of this kind, though interviewees also stressed that finding the equivalent of a “combat zone” in your home area could be traumatic for veterans, or any first responders. Following this significant test of resilience, local law enforcement continues to face challenges in officer recruitment

and retention, as well as admitted loss of morale and post-traumatic stress responses within the force, as well as recruitment issues.

*Recommendation:*

- *Know your people and be aware of and prepared to address the toll of the response on the front lines.* Engage in proactive strategic training to help leaders recognize “battle fatigue” in personnel to avoid deterioration of judgment and decision-making on the front lines to maintain the integrity and stability of the response. Have a plan in place for dealing with line personnel experiencing prolonged exposure to significant protests, including training to allow leaders (and colleagues) to recognize when personnel need to disengage and recover *during* a prolonged response, as well as long-term support in the aftermath.
- *Organization and unit commanders must provide tools and resources to allow officers to decompress immediately following their shift, preferably prior to returning home.* In addition to advanced training and preparedness to understand and deal strategically as an organization with

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<sup>18</sup>Gorgon, K. (2014, October 14). *The Darkroom - Baltimore Sun*, Retrieved from <http://darkroom.baltimoresun.com/2014/10/in-ferguson-a-new-wave-of-protests-against-police/#7>.; Moffitt, E. (2015, November 17). Calling in the ethicist: Reflecting on Ferguson with understanding for protesters and police. *St Louis Public Radio*, Retrieved from

<http://news.stpublicradio.org/post/calling-ethicist-reflecting-ferguson-understanding-protesters-and-police#stream/0>; Young, L. (2014, August 16). Ferguson protests. *Boston Globe*, Retrieved from [http://archive.boston.com/bigpicture/2014/08/ferguson\\_protests.html](http://archive.boston.com/bigpicture/2014/08/ferguson_protests.html).

psychological impacts of prolonged unrest, this specific recommendation was highlighted as a practical “must do” for leaders when managing personnel on the front lines. Acute decompression is valuable to not only the responder, but also his/her family, and can foster a more resilient, stable workforce over the lifecycle of an event.

- *Pay special attention to needs and experience of combat veterans.*

Leaders should examine the need for training and protocols specific to veterans who may have to face prolonged deployment to potentially traumatic "combat-like" responses and be aware of how their combat veterans are faring on the front lines. Also, be aware of how the experience of those veterans can be helpful in shaping policy and procedure; seek their input in advance of an event.

Given the recent trend of civil unrest in response to officer-involved shootings, leaders must also be willing to commit to continuing education and training specific to preparedness for prolonged events of this kind.

Recommendation:

- *Keep abreast of current trends and best practices.* Leaders should be aware of ongoing research, lessons learned in the field, and strategies relative to civil unrest and be ready to adapt training and procedure to create the most informed operational response plan

possible. Take the opportunity to develop broad strategic awareness that incorporates operational, tactical and personnel considerations within the public safety realm, and also the impact and involvement of cultural, environmental, and social factors that can affect a response in their specific communities.

## ***Dimension 2: The Situation***



*Police attempt to move back protestors in Ferguson, MO, August 2014 (Credit: Tuyen Pham via Flickr Commons).*

The initial unrest after the August 9<sup>th</sup> shooting was prolonged and, though it varied in intensity over the two-plus weeks of response, it presented a near unrelenting challenge for leaders and responders in terms of understanding the evolving situation and maintaining an effective response.

Recommendations:

- *Anticipate shift points and be ready for a long haul.* Accept that this type of event is not just a matter of scale. Make sure that leaders and support staff are thinking about the short-term situational management, *and* also planning ahead for possible medium- and long-term

needs. Be able to answer the “what if?” scenarios, in terms of operations, personnel, and strategy.

- *Make and drill and a long-duration plan.* Develop a template for how you could handle 80-90% of your force deployed for more than 96 consecutive hours including staffing rotations and relief (physical and mental). Consider traditional resources (e.g. mutual aid) and the non-traditional (meal service, guided mindfulness).
- *Communicate clearly and thoroughly; understand the ramifications of a dual narrative on response efforts.* In Ferguson, multiple narratives complicated the situation, not only about who was in charge, but also the on-the-ground events as they were unfolding, often portraying police action in a negative light and under-reporting the violence faced by responders. Communicating with front-line personnel as close to “real time” as possible to keep them abreast of developments, availability of resources, change in strategy, etc. is critical to maintaining a united response effort and keeping the front lines focused. Engaging a dedicated and skilled public affairs team is critical to managing false narratives and limit the spread of misinformation that can add exacerbate an already unstable situation. Interviewees recommended the use of a documentation team with the skirmish line to both assist with after-action

reports and testimony and provide public information teams with a more accurate picture of threats officers were facing. Daily updates communication from leaders to all staff is recommended for broader, clearer situational awareness.

- *Understand the local and the bigger societal picture.* Particularly with respect to civil unrest, leaders must understand the societal narratives at play, locally, nationally and internationally. It is important to account for unique environmental factors necessitating adjustments to incident management, including when multiple events affect a single region. Leaders should take lessons from previous events and recognize unique circumstances, including social tensions that may require strategic adaptation to achieve broad situational awareness. Regional, national and political influences may affect the types of narratives that emerge from certain operational and tactical action and require tailored response.
- *Engage socially.* Prepare a social media strategy that enables high levels of adaptation as the situation evolves. Plan on “bless the messenger, not the message” autonomy for trusted PIOs. Communication will need to be constant and consistent. Traditional models and methods may not be sufficient.

### Dimension 3: Connectivity



*Ferguson Police Chief Thomas Jackson identifies the officer involved in the shooting of Michael Brown in August 2014 (credit: Sixty Five via Flickr Commons).*

The “whole community” approach to disaster response is a useful tool for response to prolonged civil unrest.<sup>19</sup> One of the major challenges faced during the response was the conflict over who or what agency was in charge. Multiple changes in overall official command and control impacted situational awareness, affected morale, and hampered the response.

#### *Recommendation:*

- *Prepare and train in advance for a multi-agency response.* It is important to collaborate within and beyond public safety agencies (like law enforcement, EMS and fire departments), including with government officials, community leaders, non-profits, and local businesses, to think through, plan for,

and exercise (early and thoroughly) a multi-agency response to major civil unrest in advance of such an event. Particularly with respect to political relationships, public safety leaders should know whose help they will need and what kind (resources, community relations, media coverage, etc.); recognize who might be a barrier to success; and be prepared to leverage good relationships early and often. Collaboration with non-law enforcement agencies, such as community groups and churches, health care providers (including mental health) health professionals, Public Health Departments, and civic associations, is critical to understanding the broader impact of such an event, recognizing gaps in response plans, and building helpful relationships in advance.

- *If one agency is in charge of the overarching response, be clear and consistent with that decision.* While engaged in these advanced collaborative planning efforts, identify what agency or agencies will maintain charge of the overarching response. Flip-flopping between agencies in control degraded the efficiency and effectiveness of the Ferguson response.

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<sup>19</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency. December 2011. *A whole community approach to emergency management: Principles, themes, and pathways for action.* FDOC 104-008-1. Retrieved from:

[https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/20130726-1813-25045-0649/whole\\_community\\_dec2011\\_\\_2\\_.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/20130726-1813-25045-0649/whole_community_dec2011__2_.pdf)

- *Start local, stay local whenever possible.* One respondent would have preferred to have local agencies in command, feeling that having state and federal agencies supersede them created an impression of incompetence “that persists to this day.”
- *Learn as you go.* Respondents reported that synchrony of operations improved over time and, after August, were “much better.” One noted that it helps greatly to “know the people in the region.”

The reported longstanding strain in community relations between law enforcement and residents certainly affected the length and intensity of the events in Ferguson. Though interviewee responses varied with respect to whether relations had improved since 2015, there was clear agreement that advanced investment in community relations is necessary.

*Recommendation:*

- *Build community relationships long before an event happens.* Law enforcement may no longer live in communities where they serve, but leaders must seek and commit to other opportunities to engage with the community in a positive, sustained way to build trusted relationships. NPLI has seen before the benefit of engaging community organizations, neighborhood faith leaders, local business owners, non-profits and social service agencies who aid the community to the table for joint programs, general relationship

building, and general public safety planning.

In addition to connecting on a personal level with the community, Public Information Officers and leaders during interviews made it clear that connecting with the public via social media is no longer optional. The communication *must be* a two-way dialog.

*Recommendation:*

- *Social Media — use it!* The public was consistently using social media to get out information about protest locations, gather support, and share images and videos from the ongoing unrest. By establishing a reliable and consistent social media presence ahead of an event, public safety can communicate in real time with the public on events as they are unfolding, correct misinformation, and share tips or warnings about anything from road closures to outbreaks of violence that may affect the public. Delegate authority to trusted staff to communicate effectively and clearly, keeping information flowing to the public and other partners, without having to wait for official approval of each message.

## Other Key Takeaways: Training

- *Rethinking training to address behavioral elements of crisis response, particularly those affecting first responders in a prolonged civil unrest is a must.* Training on interpreting body language, emotional intelligence, the emotional basement, and related behaviors could have been greatly useful prior to the Ferguson response efforts.<sup>20</sup>
- *Train leaders to have a comprehensive “bias towards action.”* This means leaders should understand and train officers in the full complement of de-escalation tactics, non-aggressive communication, and when required, appropriate use of force measures that are available to handle the public safety issue that presents itself.
- *Start leadership training earlier.* It was noted that sergeants and lieutenants are often expected to lead in front line situations. Building leadership capacity and capability deeper in public safety organizations would better equip these individuals to deal effectively with difficult and stressful situations. This would include leading down to their officers as well as up to their superiors

in the chain of command. A consistent culture of leadership might help improve adaptive capacity amidst turbulence and improve outcomes.

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<sup>20</sup> For more on adapting emergency response training to include understanding of neurological and behavioral responses to crisis, see McNulty, E. J., Dorn, B.C., Serino, R., Goralnick, E., Grimes, J.O., Flynn, L.B.,

Pillay, S.S. & Marcus, L.J. (2018), Integrating brain science into crisis leadership development. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 11(4): 7-20. doi:10.1002/jls.21548

## 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 DIMENSIONS OF 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 proactively 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 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Secret Service, FEMA Transportation Security Administration, and numerous private sector organizations.