

L200 Crucible Essay

MAJ C. W. Crary

Exam Code 4524, Staff Group 22D

L200, Leadership Applied

2 January 2009

The purpose of this essay is to identify, describe, and justify a crucible experience; discuss how the crucible experience influenced my personal leadership style, beliefs, philosophy, or behaviors; and explain how the crucible experience will influence me as an organizational leader. To do this it is probably best to first define a crucible experience. According to the article *Crucibles of Leadership*, Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas define a crucible as:

A trial or a test, a point of deep self-reflection that forced a person to question who they were and what mattered to them. It required them to examine their values, question their assumptions, and hone their judgment. Invariably, they emerged from the crucible stronger and more sure of themselves and their purpose—changed in some fundamental way.¹

Based off of this definition, it is somewhat of a challenge to find a crucible experience. I have certainly lived through a number of trying situations; however, it was my values and beliefs which pulled me through. With that said, I could use my last assignment as a force integration officer for the Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A) as crucible experience.

So why was my assignment as a force integration officer for the CSTC-A a crucible experience? Prior to this assignment, one of the paradigms I believed in was that to be a successful military officer I needed to master both the technical and tactical aspects of my branch, engineering. With this mindset, I chose my assignments with due diligence and focused a majority of my self-development time towards all things engineering. Up to this point this philosophy was working. I had been extremely successful in my previous assignments, and I felt I had the necessary tools to be successful in future engineering assignments. When I signed up for the individual augmentee assignment to Afghanistan, I was slated to fill a Joint Manning Document (JMD) slot as the Combat Engineer Team Chief responsible for the development of the Afghan National Army (ANA) engineer units. All things seemed to be in check. I had the expertise needed for this job, it was engineering focused, and it offered an opportunity to refine my engineering knowledge. I felt I was setup for success in both the near and far term. However, when I signed into the command I was told that I was diverted from my engineer assignment and slated to be a

force integration officer in the CJ7 Force Integration Division. I asked what my specific responsibilities were, and I was told to synchronize all aspects of the training, manning, equipping, and garrisoning of the ANA. This was a job for a Functional Area 50 officer, but there were not enough of them to fill the required slots. The job was complex to say the least. It was big army stuff focused on a wide range of processes required to build and sustain an operational army. Furthermore, the tempo of operations and work requirements did not facilitate much time for training and development of new team members. If I was going to be successful, I had to figure it out myself. That was what the leadership expected of me as a field grade officer. Needless to say, the first few months were very challenging both emotionally and work related. I began to doubt my abilities, question how I could be a productive member of the team, and question if I was prepared to meet the challenges of being a field grade officer. It was definitely a trying situation, and it generated some thought of what I needed to do in order to prepare myself for the multitude of requirements in future assignments.

With the crucible defined, I will transition into how this experience influence changes in my personal leadership style, beliefs, philosophy, and behavior. One of the biggest lessons learned from this experience was renewed confidence or belief in my abilities. The assignment placed me in an environment where I initially had little knowledge of the concepts and processes. Doubt set in, and I began to question my abilities to become a productive member of the staff. As time progressed I began to realize that I did have a lot to offer, and my previous training did provide me with some background expertise. Most importantly was the ability to define, analyze, and develop a solution to a problem. In the end, I was able to retool the application of my skills which helped me overcome the initial doubts I had. The experience served as a good initiation into the expectations of a field grade officer, and it provided me a test to demonstrate that I was extremely capable of handling complex situations outside of just engineering. The second lesson learned was that I needed to reshape the engineer centric paradigm. I still hold firm the notion that I need to be technically and tactically proficient in engineering matters; however, to be successful as a field grade officer I need to be able to perform in a number of branch immaterial jobs also. To prepare for this I must add some balance in my self-development model to add

topics like managerial skills, conceptual modeling, operational art, and/or systems development and integration. The final lesson served more as a reinforcement of an old concept. This would be the importance of teamwork and empowering others. I would like to say I have always integrated these aspects into my leadership practices, but the truth is up until this point it was not always a necessity. During this assignment, the reverse was true due to the complexity, scope, and my limited knowledge of the operations. I was forced to empower others to come up with solutions and/or lean on others to help me gain the required knowledge to be effective. I was rarely let down, and the support received greatly assisted my understanding and accomplishment of the missions assigned. In the end, I was extremely successful and proved to be an integral member of the force integration team.

The crucible experience with CSTC-A provided me with an excellent opportunity to examine organizational leadership through the actions of CSTC-A leadership. From them I took away some key lessons in establishing an organizational vision and implementation strategy, negotiations, and developing a learning organization. When I signed in to CSTC-A I received the one-over-the-world vision statement; however, there was no established road map for the staff to use to achieve it. This was partly due to the command just restructuring from Combined Forces Command – Afghanistan to CSTC-A. Over time an implementation plan was developed which outlined the roles and responsibilities of the staff; established short, near, and long term objectives; established measures of performance and measures of effectiveness to evaluate actions; and established a timetable with milestones to establish gates of when the objectives should be met. Once the plan was established, clarity was added and the staff began working in a more efficient manner. Not only did it help the staff, but it also, served as an excellent tool to inform newly assigned members of their requirements. My takeaway was that a broad vision statement by itself does little without some sort of implementation strategy attached to it. Negotiations also played a key role. This requirement was partly created by three unique situations: the command consisted of a coalition staff, the command was top heavy and divided into functional directorates, and most importantly a majority of our plans had to be endorsed by the Minister of Defense of the ANA. Due to the depth and breadth of our operations there were always several ways to accomplish the mission, and each stakeholder

had his proposed course of action which would achieve the end state as well as satisfy their interest. To come away with one approved course of action intense negotiations were needed in order to satisfy all parties without derailing the effort. The final lesson learned was building an adaptive staff or learning organization willing and capable of trying new approaches and adjusting plans to unexpected changes in external variables. Most of the time we were operating in uncharted waters, and if the staff focused on ridged bureaucratic processes we would have had little success. Clearly this was aided by the commanding general's forcefulness to keep his staff looking for new and improved ways to accomplish the problem, the various boards and working groups which fostered collaborative thinking, and the metrics the staff used to assess where potential problems may occur which fostered proactive problem solving.

In conclusion, my assignment as a force integration officer for CSTC-A created a crucible experience in which lessons were learned. It was not an all earth shattering experience which challenged or redefined my leadership values; however, it certainly was a stressful experience which made me reflect on some of my beliefs and assumptions. The two biggest takeaways I gained from this experience were a renewed confidence in my abilities and the requirement for me to broaden the scope of my self-development model. In addition to this, the experience offered me an opportunity to gain insight on the art of organizational leadership.

ENDNOTES

1. Department of the Army, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, *L100: Developing Organizations and Leaders* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC, August 2008), 339.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

U.S. Department of the Army, Command and General Staff College, *L100: Developing Organizations and Leaders*. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2008.