

L200 Crucible Essay

As a requirement for the Leadership 200 course at CGSC, we were asked to select a leadership crucible from our past and reflect on how it affected aspects of our leadership, present and future. After much reflection, I chose to discuss my deployment to Iraq in 2006. In this essay, I will first describe my crucible experience and explain why it caused me to re-examine my paradigms. I will then explain how the experience influenced my personal leadership beliefs and behaviors. Finally, I will conclude by discussing how the crucible experience will influence me in the future as an organizational level leader.

Before I describe my crucible, I will first provide some background information that is pertinent to the experience. I'm an Army veterinary officer by trade. Prior to my deployment to Iraq my previous assignments and deployments had all been branch specific. I was a newly promoted major assigned as a staff officer at a logistics organization doing what I knew best, food safety and veterinary medicine. My paradigm at the time was that I was a veterinarian with a very specific skill set that limited me to "veterinary assignments". That paradigm was challenged when the organization selected me to deploy as the Operations Officer for a forward logistics support team in Iraq.

I initially experienced some trepidation and doubted my ability to succeed within an area that I knew little about. When I arrived at Camp Victory I felt further reservation when I discovered that the guy I was replacing was a high speed logistics officer who was well respected by the Major General we supported. The General visited within the first few days I was there and told me I had big shoes to fill. The job was extremely challenging; I quickly realized that the Operations Officer was the workhorse of the team. I was the go to guy on most issues, and delegation was not an option; there was no one else to delegate to. I was soon immersed in the logistics business, querying wholesale logistics systems and consolidating data

from Iraq, Kuwait, and Afghanistan to assist with resolution of critical logistics shortfalls impacting tactical operations throughout CENTCOM. I was a long way from the clinic where “operations” takes on a very different connotation. The first few months were challenging, but eventually I established a battle rhythm and learned to prioritize better. My boss and the General we supported were very happy with my performance. I came to realize that they viewed me not as a veterinarian but as an Army major with a broader skill set and the ability to adapt to unexpected challenges.

Midway through my deployment, a key leadership position needed filled in Western Iraq at a forward deployed team responsible for operating a central collection point for battle damaged equipment and hazardous waste. I was tasked to forward deploy and lead the team composed of Army, Navy, and Department of Defense personnel. I was forewarned that there were some serious internal issues among team members. I was also tasked to complete a series of high priority projects that had stalled. My initial assessment when I arrived was that morale in the team was dismal. Internal conflicts between staff and the previous team leader had severely degraded the work environment and impeded mission accomplishment. There was internal conflict and mistrust between the military team members and civilian team members. I was essentially cut off from headquarters due to poor connectivity, so I had to come up with creative solutions to handle the multitude of leadership issues that needed to be addressed. It proved to be a tough but rewarding leadership challenge for me. I was successful in making positive changes to the work environment and uniting the team. I gained valuable experience leading a joint team in an austere combat environment.

Now that I’ve described my crucible, I will explain how it has influenced my beliefs and behavior. The crucible no doubt helped me understand more about myself and shatter the limitations I was putting on myself. The experience helped me better understand what I was capable of and gave me a better sense of what was expected of a field grade officer. I came

away from the experience with a new mental model that I wasn't a medical officer first but rather a leader first and foremost. I had a new sense of my ability to adapt to uncertainty and unexpected challenges. I gained self confidence from knowing that I met some unique challenges head on and excelled. I also learned through the experience that determination is half the battle. The experience will certainly change my behavior in the future. I am more inclined to step out of my comfort zone and seek out situations that will benefit me greatly as a progress in my career.

Lessons learned from my crucible experience will influence me as a future organizational leader. I'll illustrate this assertion by discussing how the crucible expanded my understanding of three leadership competencies from the Army Leadership Requirements Model detailed in Field Manual 6-22 which will better prepare me for organizational leadership¹: prepares self, creates a positive environment, and extends influence beyond the chain of command. In terms of preparing myself, the crucible helped me glean the importance of expanding my knowledge base in order to meet the leadership demands of an unpredictable and complex operational environment. From my interaction with organizational leaders in Iraq, I came to understand that effective organizational leaders must develop skill sets outside their own lanes in order to be effective leaders.

The crucible will also influence me as an organizational leader because it cast light on the criticality of creating a positive work environment. I realized when I arrived to take the helm of my team in western Iraq that I needed the expertise of the team members in order to be successful. I witnessed firsthand the deleterious effects that a negative work climate and persistent conflict had on morale and productivity. By creating a positive work environment, fostering teamwork and building trust among the team members I was able to maximize the

¹ US, Department of the Army. FM 6-22, Army Leadership (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, October 2006), A1.

talent within the team. Similarly, an organizational leader needs the collective expertise of personnel within an organization in order to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.

Lastly, the crucible will influence me as an organizational leader because it strengthened my ability to extend my influence beyond the chain of command. While deployed to lead the central collection point team, I was dependent on resources and support from external organizations in order to accomplish the mission. We needed more land, and the building we operated out of needed significant repairs. I negotiated agreements with the Marines who owned the land we were on, the Air Force engineers who drafted the facility improvement blueprints, and other key players. I had to develop an understanding of my sphere of influence, build trust with other organizations, and succinctly communicate my organization's needs to appropriate parties.

To conclude, my deployment to Iraq represented a significant leadership crucible in my career. It was transformative because it helped me break down limitations I had placed on myself and contributed to my growth as an adaptive leader. I learned the importance of broadening my knowledge base outside my field which will greatly benefit me in my role as an organizational leader. The experience will positively influence me as an organizational leader because it strengthened my understanding of how to better prepare myself for future challenges as a senior Army leader. The experience also enlightened me to the critically of creating a positive environment and allowed me real world experience extending my influence beyond the chain of command. This crucible provided many important lessons that I will continue to call upon in my career.