

My Leadership Crucible

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There have been several crucible experiences throughout my lifetime. Several of these experiences occurred during my deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom from August 2003 to August 2004. I deployed as a company commander of a mechanized Infantry company. During that year, my company operated in the Anbar province. Our operations were focused mainly in Fallujah, Iraq and the MSR between Fallujah and AR Ramadi. While I faced many challenges and hardships during my year in Iraq, one event can be identified as the nexus that caused me to challenge my personnel leadership style and paradigms of how an infantry company commander should lead his company in combat. I was required to transition my leadership style from a direct leadership model to one of an organizational leader.

The event that caused my crucible experience occurred early in my deployment. On my first mission in Iraq I was conducting a counter improvised explosive device (IED) sweep along the MSR north of Fallujah Iraq. Within the first hour of the operation my vehicle was struck by an IED consisting of two 155mm rounds that detonated approximately 20 meters from my vehicle. During the blast I was wounded and evacuated to the brigade medical company where I was treated for my wounds. The doctors treating me gave me the opportunity to stay and be treated at the C-MED company or be evacuated back to the States to recover and then return back to theatre. While I was being treated I was visited by my battalion, brigade, and division commanders who all agreed to give me the opportunity to not only stay in theatre but also stay in command of my company. However, they all placed one caveat on their decision to allow me to stay and command my company. I was not allowed to leave the perimeter and go on combat operations until I was cleared by the surgeons. Thus, setting up my crucible of leadership of having to figure out how to command an infantry company (for what turned out to be two months) when not allowed to follow my normal leadership style, philosophy, or mental models of what a company commander should do. My leadership style, philosophy, and beliefs prior to that time can be summarized by the paradigm that officers lead from the front and share the hardships with their soldiers. Until that point in my military career I was able to uphold the standards of

that paradigm by having a direct leadership style. I was always able to have direct control over most situations by placing myself at the key or decisive points. While I was willing to go on missions after my injury I was unable to do so. I was unable to use my direct leadership style and I was forced to establish a more organizational leadership style to lead, motivate and influence my company during that two month period. I was forced to determine new ways to control organizational stress, ensure that I maintained an ethical organization, and create a learning organization to determine new techniques, tactics and procedures to combat the insurgents constantly changing tactics for emplacing IEDs.

My first challenge was to determine how to relieve organizational stress that was beginning to grow in my company due to repeated counter IED sweeps. My company conducted counter IED operations twice daily. When I was wounded it showed my company that the dangers we faced were real. While I was recovering six soldiers in my company were wounded. Most were able to return to duty but one was evacuated back to the states for additional treatment. The daily stress of driving along the MSR trying to find IED the correct way was beginning to grow within my company. While I was not able to lead by example by continuing to execute missions, I was able to affect the situation by reducing the amount of leader imposed stress that my soldiers were forced to deal with. I was able to work with the battalion commander and to establish a battle rhythm that balanced counter IED operations and raids. When my soldiers were not on mission we relaxed the uniform standards and allowed them to wear PT's and remove their full battle rattle. Before they were allowed to relax they were required to conduct PCC and PCIs that I established to ensure their vehicles and equipment were ready at a moments notice. I was able to provide my soldiers with some level of predictability which allowed them to generally project when they would have a mission and when they wouldn't. By helping my soldiers deal with the stress of becoming casualties or watching their friends get hurt or killed I was able to get combat stress teams to come and talk with them to work through issues. I also established an environment where my soldiers felt comfortable approaching me about issues or concerns that

they had about operations. I worked with my NCOs and officers to ensure they were also approachable and available for their soldiers. This allowed my company to have an open and transparent relationship about the issues that were stressing the soldiers. Had I not been wounded I do not believe that I would have been as effective at reducing organizational stress within my company as I was. I measured the effectiveness of my efforts by the willingness of my soldiers to ask for help when they became post traumatic during our tour and after and did not feel stigmatized by asking for help.

The second challenge I faced was how to ensure I maintained an ethical organization when I was not able to set the example on operations. My biggest challenge in ensuring that my soldiers were following the laws of land warfare was that I was not able to observe their actions individually or as a collective organization while on mission. Not being able to lead by example and demonstrate the standards that our senior headquarters and I expected to be followed presented an additional challenge. This was especially difficult when the organizational stress levels began to rise and my soldiers began to view every Iraqi as an insurgent or Al Qaeda member. This belief is extremely detrimental to counter insurgency warfare. If I failed to ensure that I had an ethical organization we would be susceptible to committing anything from war crimes to fostering support for the insurgents. In order to ensure my soldiers understood the ethical standards that they would be held to, I routinely challenged my soldiers with ethical vignettes, briefings to ensure that they understood the standards of conduct expected.

Additionally, I required my platoon and squad leaders to use the vignette system as part of their PCC/PCIs. Finally, I ensured that every soldier understood penalties and punishments that would be incurred for any transgressions. When I was informed of a breach of the standards I swiftly punished the individual for even a minimal breach of conduct. I believe my soldiers understood that ethical violations would not be tolerated when I punished my company XO for questionable decisions while on a mission in my absence and finally when I relieved a platoon leader for unethical actions. Because I was not there to observe these transgressions I relied on every

soldier to observe and monitor the actions of their unit. I knew I had been effective in establishing an ethical organization when my soldiers reported possible violations to me or chose to self regulate the actions of the unit.

The final major organizational challenge I faced was developing a learning organization. Conducting counter IED operations was initially difficult because we had to learn the TTPs of the insurgents. It was easy to become lulled into a false sense of security due to the repetition of that type of operation. To be successful I had to ensure that my soldiers were always changing their tactics to combat the new IED threats we discovered. This adaptability would ensure that we were successful in reducing the IED threat while not becoming targets. After each mission I ensured that the soldiers conducted patrol debriefs and ensured that any new TTPs were disseminated across the company. Additionally, I challenged my NCOs and officers to continually attempt to determine what the next new insurgent technique would be then attempt to verify the most likely assumptions. In effect, we had created a company Intel cell and by allowing every soldier to participate and present a new possible enemy TTPs they truly began live to the soldiers as a sensor concept. I knew this idea was effective when most soldiers in the company began to use this method or skill for every type of operation we conducted over our tour.

During the two months I was prevented from conducting combat operations I did not realize how much and what I had learned until after I returned from theatre. As stated I was forced to quickly become an organizational leader. Through this experience I learned that for a direct leadership style setting the example is important; as an organizational leader this trait is only partially responsible for setting the organization's climate and culture. After I was wounded I was not able to directly monitor the success of my ability to manage the organizational stress, ethical decision making ability, or if my company was a learning organization. I was required to develop measures of effectiveness to gauge and monitor the conditions within my company. I realized that organizational leaders are dependant on other individuals and

subordinate leaders to help maintain the standards of conduct and performance. When I was allowed to stay in command after my injury I knew I was given a golden opportunity. It was not until I returned from theatre and was able to evaluate everything I had learned did I realize what a gift I had been given. I was forced out of my comfort zone and I realized that my direct leadership style would not be successful in that situation. I was allowed a glimpse of what would be required of me as an organizational leader and to begin to develop that leadership style as a young officer.