

L200 Crucible Experience

Over the course of my twelve years of military service as a commissioned officer, I have experienced many situations that challenged my core beliefs and preconceived prejudices and biases. Due to these experiences, both my leadership style and my personality have changed considerably since I entered the military. The most significant such experience, or crucible, I faced occurred in the early morning of September 30, 2004 on Camp Victory, Iraq. At approximately 0430 that morning, one of our outstanding soldier's was killed in his sleep when his trailer was hit in a rocket attack. I will discuss how this event changed my leadership style and how I will use it to help shape my style and strategy as an organizational level leader.

In order to understand why this event was such a crucible experience, it is necessary to provide some background information on the situation leading up to September 30, 2004. The Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC) of the 89th Military Police Brigade deployed to Iraq in January 2004 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom 2 in order to provide command and control to MP units operating in and around Baghdad and to establish and train Iraqi Police (IP) units in Baghdad. The units that fell under the brigade were a mix of units from across the Army and they operated out of various Forward Operating Bases (FOB) spread across the city. None of these units had an organic affiliation or garrison working relationship with the brigade prior to deployment. As the Brigade S4, my job was to ensure that all these units had what they needed to accomplish their mission: supplies, equipment, repair parts, etc.

Over the course of the first nine months of our deployment, we settled into routines and went about our duties. We received indirect fire attacks most days, but they rarely did any damage and we soon became numb to them. The brigade did suffer some serious casualties, including some deaths, but until September 30th, none of those killed were Soldiers from the HHC; my unit. I attended memorial services for these Soldiers and felt saddened by their loss, but I didn't really know any of them. For most, I had never met, seen, or even heard their

names until their deaths. My sadness for their deaths faded away soon after their memorial services were complete and I returned to my duties. This all changed on September 30th, 2004.

On September 29, 2004, I returned to Camp Victory from my Environmental and Morale Leave (EML). After taking care of some administrative issues, I promptly fell asleep in my trailer. Shortly after 0400 the next morning, I woke to a loud noise. Still groggy and disoriented from my travels, I stepped outside my trailer to see what was happening. I saw an orange blaze and large plume of smoke rising from a trailer about 75 meters behind mine. I rushed to the area to find a trailer engulfed in flames and the sound of ammunition exploding in the trailer as the fire consumed it. Within minutes, the trailer and everything inside was destroyed by the fire. We began getting accountability of our personnel; praying that no one was still inside the trailer. I soon learned that tragically someone did not make it out in time. The rocket had impacted directly on his trailer burying him with debris and burning him to death.

While there was sadness and anger about his death, the biggest realization for me was the new understanding that this could actually happen to one of us. War is real and people die; even people that you know. It didn't just happen to the other guy. It could happen to anyone, including me, at any time. This event changed my view on many things and it changed many aspects of my leadership style, both for the better and worse.

Prior to this event, I had a tendency to get overly stressed and upset over the smallest of problems. I felt that everything I did or was involved with was the most important thing and had to be done perfectly or the mission would be a failure and I would be a failure. I also expected the people I worked with to be the same way. I didn't understand the concept of good stress and bad stress. Everything was just stress and the only way to deal with it was to get something done perfectly. I couldn't comprehend why my coworkers often times didn't seem to care about what they had to do. I was constantly working late hours and worried about every little problem, real or imagined. Many of my peers, subordinates, and even supervisors were

rarely worried or stressed about anything related to the job. Because of my evaluations and reputation for being a good officer, I thought my mindset was the correct one.

This mindset changed considerably after September 30, 2004. The last three months of the deployment after the attack and SSG's death were very different for me than the preceding nine months. I was no longer so cavalier in directing our subordinate units and personnel to go off the FOB to take care of logistical issues. I conducted much more analysis to determine if a supply or maintenance mission really had to happen or if there was an alternate means of getting the mission accomplished. I also gained a new perspective on everyday life. I no longer stressed out or lost my temper over trivial matters and this has stayed with me over the last five-plus years as I completed company command and primary staff positions. I have tried to instill in my Soldiers that when mistakes happen or things go wrong, we figure out what the problem is, fix it, and drive on with the mission. As long as nobody is dead and no one is trying to kill us, chances are things will work out.

This change in perspective, while generally positive in that it fostered an environment that allowed for mistakes and open communication, also resulted in some negative consequences during the ensuing years. Because I no longer stressed over things that weren't potential life-enders, I developed an overly laissez faire leadership style and this filtered down to my subordinates. I became overly accepting of mistakes and incompetence, focusing more on fixing problems that came up rather than on the issues allowing these problems to happen. I was like a doctor treating the symptoms of a disease rather than the disease itself. Many of my subordinate leaders took their cues from me and became too accepting of poor performance and behavior of both themselves and their subordinates. In my attempt to reduce the stress levels of my Soldiers and foster a good command climate, I inadvertently ended up fostering the opposite. My overly laissez faire style ended up causing more stress due to many discipline problems within the unit and a belief that the leadership didn't care.

I soon recognized that this was happening and I made changes within myself and the unit that I will take forward as I continue my career as an organizational level leader. It is critical to analyze and determine what stress is good and what stress is bad for the formation. A certain amount of the right kinds of stress—preparations for combat, adherence to standards and time requirements, and multiple tasks requiring the correct prioritization—are good, even necessary, for units to function well and be prepared for any mission or event that it faces.

The balance must be struck between what is too much stress and too little stress. An excess of stress or the wrong kinds of stress will cause a toxic environment where Soldiers and leaders burn out, no mistakes are underwritten, and there is diminished communication and trust across the formation. Too little stress and the unit will not be able to adapt and overcome challenges when they inevitably face them and, as seen in my previous experiences, the environment can also become toxic. In order to avoid this, I will remain totally engaged with the formation and no longer utilize a laissez faire attitude. I will continuously assess myself, my subordinate leaders, and my unit as a whole to ensure that I can determine what levels and what types of stress my unit needs as well as the command climate within the unit.

In conclusion, the events of September 30, 2004 taught me that I need not stress over every little problem I faced. This event and my following assignments showed me that a balance was necessary in order to ensure an effective climate within the unit and prepare the unit for combat. In order to do this a leader must always be conducting assessments of himself and his subordinates and demanding that his subordinates do the same. This drive towards self awareness will enable leaders to foster a policy of free and open communication in order to determine what the unit really needs to prosper and become a fully capable combat ready force.