

My crucible experience had a profound effect on me as a commander and on my future as an organizational leader. My experience, being directly confronted by my SNCOs on my short-comings as a commander, forced me to re-examine my leadership style and adjust it for a permanent change. Despite being a prior enlisted officer and priding myself on being in-synch with my troops, I learned that I still need to listen to my people, regardless of my confidence and experience. Reflecting on concepts taught in the CGSC leadership curriculum, three in particular apply to my experience: organizational culture, organizational stress, and the rocket model.¹

In order to fully understand my crucible experience, it is necessary to set the stage. I was selected to be a Detachment commander (Det/CC) as a junior captain. I was both encouraged by my selection for command and daunted by the leadership challenge. As a former enlisted operator, I was familiar with the type of mission of my new unit, which was similar to my enlisted job and gave me an added degree of confidence. I assumed command of my twelve-person Det in October 2003 after my predecessor (a 20+ year prior enlisted captain) had left the previous July, leaving a three-month gap without an officer presence in the unit. My Operations Superintendent (Joe) was a very capable, seventeen-year Master Sergeant (MSgt) and the majority of the Det were seasoned NCOs and SNCOs. However, after meeting my boss, the squadron commander, for the first time, I was given marching orders to take the Det and “shape them up, they are in need of leadership.” I intended to do just that.

My crucible experience actually began shortly after my arrival. All five of the SNCOs assigned to my unit had a great deal of experience in the mission, both as technicians and as leaders. Probably the most difficult thing for the Det was to adjust to having an officer around them again; certainly they felt they could accomplish the mission without having to be babysat.

¹ Hughes, Richard L., Robert C. Ginnett, & Gordon J. Curphy “Building High Performance Teams: The Rocket Model” from *Leadership, Enhancing the Lessons of Experience*, McGraw-Hill/Irwing, pages 506-513.

However, they welcomed me and helped me to hit the ground running. With my marching orders in hand, I set out to “shape up” the Det. With Joe’s help and a list of half-started projects left by my predecessor, we achieved some early success as I tightened up our programs, policies, and mission processes, while the Det and I got to know each other.

It was during this initial feeling out period that Joe made a comment that shook my confidence and began my crucible experience. He said that I operated much differently than my predecessor, who he thought of as a “SNCO with captain’s bars,” very high praise in his eyes; based on the former Det/CC’s experience and the fact that he was himself a SNCO once, they were always in-synch. I immediately took it as a rebuke; the previous commander was accepted as one of them, and I was not. Upon reflection, Joe’s comment raises an issue discussed during our class on organizational culture. Although I had a great deal of operational experience compared to other officers of my rank, I did not have the level of experience of my predecessor. Due in large measure to his background and experience, he related more easily to the SNCOs within the Det and saw things from their point of view. This essentially established an implicit standard for the leaders of the Det, where the SNCOs made most of the decisions. In some instances, such group norms could be seen as positive, however, in this situation, it established a roadblock that I had to overcome, though I did not realize it at that time.

Several days after our conversation, Joe and I had a confrontation that greatly affected our relationship. Joe walked into my office and declared: “We have a problem,” and promptly laid out how he felt it should be handled. Up to this point, this was our modus operandi; I generally agreed with all of his recommendations. However, based on his earlier comment and my own insecurity, I over-reacted. Despite the fact that he was spot-on in his assessment and recommendation, I laid down the law and responded by telling him that “I make the decisions in the Det and I’ll decide how we will proceed.” This stung him as he shook his head and replied, “Yes Captain, you’re the boss.” Our encounter highlighted a second L100 leadership principle,

organizational stress. My reaction (or over-reaction) undoubtedly provided a source of stress for him and, ultimately, the organization as a whole. Once I shut him out as a source of advice, I made myself less effective as a leader. But even more to the point, the stress that I laid at his feet undoubtedly got back to the other SNCOs, making them all less likely to bring problems (and solutions) to my attention. I had become a source of stress to my organization.

About a month later, Joe came to me and asked if I would be willing to meet with all the SNCOs and I agreed. Sensing that they wanted to give me feedback on how things were going in the Det, I braced myself for what I was going to hear. At the meeting, after I made some remarks and opened it up as “non-attribution,” they laid into me. Although I had prepared myself, it was not enough. Each one of them explained, in their own way, how they did not understand the direction I was taking the Det and that I was making too many decisions without their input; essentially, my leadership style was grating negatively on everyone. As I listened to each of them speak, I took notes but couldn’t bring myself to look up as I could feel the emotion welling up inside of me. Until this point, I thought I was doing a great job and acting exactly as a commander should, making all of the decisions, so it was a hard pill to swallow. At the conclusion, one of the SNCOs sensed how I was feeling and ended with the comment “we don’t think you are doing a bad job.” This was the climax of my crucible experience.

Fortunately, we were able to resolve the situation and come out of it stronger as a unit. Using the Rocket Model as the framework to analyze my crucible experience, I can apply the principles to better understand how I resolved my problem.² In this situation, the mission was well known throughout the organization. My unit was full of experienced NCOs and SNCOs; the talent was unbelievable and I realized that from day one that I had something special with the group I was lucky enough to command. The two areas that I needed to focus on most were the norms and the buy-in, which I did not realize until my crucible experience. I had to begin by

² Hughes, 258.

adjusting the norms. I realized after the meeting that the SNCOs were right; I desperately needed their input to my decisions to make me more effective as a leader and the Det more effective as a team. However, they needed to adjust their paradigm for how decisions were made; I was not going to be a rubber stamp for all of the solutions they provided, I was going to go against their advice at times, something that I could tell did not happen very often before. I included them in every important decision from then on out, and slowly over time, I won their buy-in, and then began pushing more decision-making power down to their level, two other aspects of the Rocket Model. In the end, the results speak for themselves; we accomplished more than, I would argue, any of us thought we could have. We became the most effective unit that I have ever been associated with.

In conclusion, my crucible experience made me a better commander and a stronger leader. It challenged my beliefs of the role of the commander and my relationship with my SNCOs. Probably for the first time in my career, I realized that the commander sets the agenda and provides the unit vision but it is not up to him or her to solve all of the problems. As I've reflected over this year, my leadership style caused me to be a source of organizational stress for my unit. However, just as I needed to adjust my leadership style to be a source of composure, my unit had to adjust their organizational culture, specifically their group norms, so that we could become an effective team. As I look back, the Rocket Model would have served me well as I arrived at my new unit, although I unwittingly applied the model's principles and established new group norms and developed buy-in to resolve my crucible experience. Armed with the leadership principles covered throughout CGSC, and with the benefit of careful reflection on my crucible experience, I am confident that I will be a better organizational leader in the future. This experience has led me to greater self-awareness.

Bibliography

HughesRichardL, GinnettRobert, CurphyGordon, *Leadership, Enhancing the Lessons of Experience* . s.l. , McGraw-Hill/Irwin , 2006 , pp.506-513 .