

L200 Crucible Essay: Overcoming Adversity

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As a newly promoted major, I had a couple of very adverse years in my personal and professional life that forever changed me in ways that I hope made me a better leader and a better person on the whole. In retrospect, three valuable traits for a leader are (1) emotional intelligence, (2) optimism, and (3) resilience. I will attempt to briefly explain how my personal experience has solidified my appreciation for these key traits and why I will spend the majority of my energy in my remaining Army career to help others foster and develop these traits.

My crucible experience began when I was summoned to a meeting with a team of doctors who were caring for my daughter at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in June of 2007. I had just taken a job as the S3 of the Army's first Warrior Transition Unit, effective April 30, 2007. I was consumed with a whirlwind of activity related to standing up a new type of Army organization under close scrutiny from bureaucrats and lawmakers in the nation's capitol as well as dealing with the fact that my four-year-old daughter was gravely ill. Then, I found out that my ex-wife was afflicted with a terrible psychological disease, Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy, and that she was literally poisoning our child in order to gain attention from the pediatric staff at Walter Reed. To make matters worse, one of the doctors at the center of the case against my ex-wife boasted to me that he had suspected my ex-wife was poisoning our daughter for months before confronting us with his laboratory results that proved the facts of the case in court (my biased view is that he waited to intervene so that he could "play detective" and build a case on my ex-wife for his own egocentric reasons). I experienced an overwhelming feeling of betrayal from my spouse as well as from the doctors, trained at the premier military medical facility, who were charged with my daughter's care. Over the next two years, I experienced the most challenging situations to date in both my professional and personal lives, from having to demonstrate in court that I was worthy of custody of my children to coming to grips with the fact that I had to end my dysfunctional marriage for self-preservation and to properly care for my

children. I also continued to work a demanding schedule in the hardest assignment by far that I've ever experienced.

This experience caused me to re-examine my personal values and priorities in both my personal and professional lives. I received plenty of praise and very good evaluations for my efforts on the job, but as I worked sixteen hour days, on average, at Walter Reed, leaving my children to their grandparents for guidance and reassurance about their situation and not being there for them, I quickly realized that I had my priorities out of alignment. I may have been doing a great job, but I was performing at a degrading rate of proficiency, because I did not have my life in balance. I could have done a much better job had I maintained the appropriate balance to keep my own morale high, and my family together while I was working in a non-deploying position. Instead I was throwing all of my energy into being a great S3, while I was neglecting my broken family and myself, ending up not being a great S3 or father.

This experience evolved my leadership philosophy in that I have a much greater appreciation for a leader who demonstrates appropriate balance between their work, family, and spiritual life, and much greater disdain for those who profess this balance while practicing a lifestyle that is transparently out of balance. Most importantly, this experience caused me to pay careful attention to how I might foster emotional intelligence, optimism, and resiliency in those that I am charged to lead.

Daniel Goleman defines emotional intelligence as "the ability to manage ourselves and our relationships effectively"<sup>1</sup>. A capability in Goleman's emotional intelligence is self-management, which includes the competencies of self-control, trustworthiness, conscientiousness, adaptability, achievement orientation, and initiative.<sup>2</sup> Another capability is self-awareness, which include the competencies of emotional self-awareness, accurate self-assessment, and self-confidence.<sup>3</sup> Goleman quotes David McClelland, "a noted Harvard

University psychologist”, stating that “leaders with a critical mass of six or more emotional intelligence competencies were far more effective than peers who lacked such strengths”<sup>4</sup>.

Successful leaders are often described as having “people skills”, which is largely a function of this emotional intelligence. The most valuable positive changes that I have evaluated in myself are increases in my own emotional intelligence, optimism, and resilience.

“Optimism is defined as having a positive explanatory style relative to both positive and negative events in the past.”<sup>5</sup> Optimistic people are more productive and more creative. Assessing events as neither permanent nor pervasive is a key component in successful leadership. It is part of that wonderful attribute known as hope. It means that I view my situation as temporary, and within my ability to change. People without hope, in cases of extreme adversity, most often capitulate, unable to continue. Our soldiers at Bunker Hill or at Bastogne have demonstrated the ability for ordinary individuals to overcome insurmountable odds. I don’t necessarily view my experience as similar to theirs, but I have an appreciation for the tremendous role that optimism played in their success. I am convinced that it was my own optimism that empowered me to overcome my own adversity (although many of my acquaintances would disagree and describe me as a pessimist, I’m referring to the psychological definition of optimism that is not necessarily descriptive of a happy-go-lucky attitude in the present). It is a vital ingredient to successful individuals and organization, and this explanatory style can be developed in others who don’t have it from birth.<sup>6</sup> It is a subtle, yet extremely powerful trait that can have an incredibly positive impact on the success of an organization.

Resilience is closely related to optimism, and is another quality that I view has having a synergistic effect on an organization that has a critical mass of team members who possess it and foster it in others. “Resilience is the capacity to bounce back from adversity, uncertainty, failure, or even positive but seemingly overwhelming changes such as increased

responsibility.”<sup>7</sup> As I described my personal experience to a social worker, she remarked “you must be an extremely resilient person”. Having the benefit of a couple of years to evaluate how I’ve adapted, I suppose that she is correct. In my view, I’m an average American, and everyone should be capable of obtaining at least my level of resiliency. If that is the case, then it is certainly worth the effort to explore methods of fostering resilience in others, and I wholeheartedly support our Army senior leadership in attempting to incorporate some method of developing this capacity in all soldiers. Certainly, I harbor petty criticisms of the corporate approach to establishing “resiliency” in the force, but the logic is absolutely sound. It is my only logical method of describing my ability to overcome my personal adversity. My life was in a complete shambles, and I still managed to continue being a productive worker and move on to a new relationship and a wonderful blended family that is responding well to some daunting changes in our lives.

Emotional intelligence is not a touchy-feely discussion of useless topics in positive psychology; it is a description of key leadership attributes that explains, in part, why some highly intelligent people have negligible ability to accomplish anything in the way of results, while many leaders of marginal intelligence are highly successful in leading organizations. Optimism is not a foolish re-framing of a situation or circumstance to see disastrous events in a positive light, but rather having a positive explanatory style with respect to the permanence and pervasiveness of good or bad events.<sup>8</sup> It is how I avoided hopelessness in the face of tragedy. Resiliency is much more than a buzzword for the latest fad in Army culture. It is the tool that has helped me to continue to function as a field grade officer in the Army and a single-parent through a disastrous chain of events with my physical and mental health intact. Emotional intelligence, optimism, and resiliency are worth the effort to develop in individuals and organizations. Developing a capacity for individuals to overcome circumstances like my own will produce amazing benefits for any type or size of organization.

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<sup>1</sup> Goleman, pg 80.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Davis & Cable Christopher Bassford, "JOMINI AND CLAUSEWITZ: THEIR INTERACTION," The Clausewitz Homepage, <http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/Bassford/Jomini/JOMINIX.htm> (accessed October 9, 2009)..

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Davis & Cable, pg 9.

## Bibliography

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