

## Hurricane Katrina: One massive storm, two very different leadership approaches\*

One of the most profound examples of complexity requiring collaboration began on Monday morning, Aug. 29, 2005, when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. It was the costliest and one of the five deadliest hurricanes in U.S. history. Billions of people around the world watched in disbelief as the world's superpower seemed astonishingly unable to save the inhabitants of a major city. Close your eyes, and no doubt you can still conjure up images of desperate people clinging to the top of their houses pleading for help as the waters rose.

Government at all levels failed the people of New Orleans, but most of the anger focused on the government's emergency management agency, FEMA. Many reasons have been offered for FEMA's dismal performance: it lost its independent status (and much flexibility) when it was moved to the Dept. of Homeland Security in 2003; the FEMA director no longer had a cabinet-level position, thus losing direct access to the president; FEMA director Michael Brown had no emergency management training. There's truth in each of these, but none gets to the core of FEMA's problems.

In the months after Michael Brown was removed from his job because of FEMA's poor performance, he argued that he had managed FEMA well but couldn't control other agencies outside his span of control. Seems reasonable at first glance, no? Brown's statement reflects a mindset totally inappropriate to our times. Yes, his job included managing FEMA, but in this enormous disaster his far larger job was to develop *partnerships* in order to take care of the storm's victims and get the city running. To borrow a term used by some basketball coaches, Brown lacked "court vision." He wasn't using his peripheral vision and didn't realize that there were other players who had to be involved in the game.

This broader job definition wasn't a radical notion at FEMA. Indeed, one of the many gifts that James Lee Witt brought to FEMA when he led it from 1993 – 2001 was his emphasis on forging partnerships with local communities. That and other changes he brought to FEMA have been widely praised by practitioners and scholars. Witt's successors at FEMA stopped emphasizing partnerships; they defined the job as managing a hierarchy. And managing a hierarchy means your focus is toward your boss and subordinates, not to potential partners. Given that mindset, it's no wonder that generous offers of help the Gulf Coast from many states, nonprofits and foreign governments weren't utilized by FEMA.

Katrina is the poster child for what goes wrong when complex challenges and crises aren't addressed collaboratively. Multiple agencies with overlapping jurisdictions

\* From: *Leading Across Boundaries: Creating Collaborative Agencies in a Networked World*, by Russell Linden. Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2010.

quarreled and pointed fingers as people died; one manager helping with the cleanup counted at least six New Orleans agencies with their own independent police agencies!

Relationships that should have been well established prior to the storm were weak or nonexistent; a senior emergency management official was stunned to see some members of Governor Blanco's cabinet literally introducing themselves to each other at a special cabinet meeting held soon after the storm hit. Lessons learned from training exercises designed to prepare the city for a huge storm were ignored. And FEMA emphasized accountability, but it was accountability to procedures, not to the larger mission.

Before you throw your arms up, don't despair. There's a wonderful side to the Katrina story that needs to be emphasized.

### **Thad Allen – A different leader, a different mindset.**

On Friday, Sep. 9, 2005, Thad Allen was appointed Principal Federal Official for Rescue and Recovery for Katrina, replacing Michael Brown. At a moment when governments at all levels appeared to be totally inept, Allen's no-nonsense demeanor soon created a sense of confidence. But Allen, a 30-plus year Coast Guard veteran, faced astonishing challenges. There was no operating government in New Orleans, people were dying in their houses and in the Louisiana Superdome, roughly 1,000,000 people were displaced and needed temporary housing.

Yet, over the course of the next three weeks, Allen and his team helped rescue approximately 60,000 people in New Orleans. A sense of order was returned to the city, rescue and recovery efforts were well coordinated, and many of the key political players who'd been pointing fingers at each other just after the storm hit were starting to cooperate. Allen received much of the credit for this turnaround. How did he do it?

- One of his first moves after taking over rescue and recovery was to invite a number of his most trusted colleagues to join him in New Orleans. Some told him he was crazy to accept the assignment, but most said yes.
- Then, Louisiana Gov. Blanco issued a blistering statement to the media criticizing the federal government for failing to retrieve bodies from New Orleans waters. Allen ignored the White House when it urged him to bash Blanco. Instead, he called her and asked, "Governor, have I done something to give you the impression that I'm interested in anything else but helping the people of Louisiana?" That call helped soften her criticism and bought a little time
- With 24 hours, Allen and Army Lt. Gen. Russel Honore` established a planning group that met daily. The two also reported their goals daily to Mayor Nagin and

Gov. Blanco. Gen. Honore` was from New Orleans and had instant credibility. They kept political leaders informed and involved at every step.

- At an early press conference Allen explained that rescue teams included a chaplain to ensure that the deceased were treated with appropriate respect. At that conference, he introduced New Orleans' director of emergency medicine, with whom he'd already started working. The physician told the press "Admiral Allen is a man of his word who's done everything he promised." That provided some credibility and reassurance.
- In symbolic and substantive ways, Allen acted on one of his favorite sayings: "*Transparency of information breeds self-correcting behavior.*" He told reporters that he would meet with key rescue officials and other stakeholders, have an open discussion, create a clear direction and move on out. He opened up the recovery process to the media, inviting the media to become a partner in telling the public what was being done to help the residents.
- Allen relied on an approach refined by the Coast Guard over the years: focus on "strategic intent." Rather than develop detailed plans, he sought agreement with partners on a general direction and major priorities, determined who was responsible for what, gave partners great flexibility, and emphasized constant communications. His leadership tools with staff and partners were communication, persuasion, shared goals and flexible means.
- Unlike Brown, Allen defined his role as *coordinating a huge network of agencies*. His team leveraged about 130 boats from other organizations. They got local responders to share knowledge of the city with those from out of state. They worked closely with the state police, state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, dozens of nonprofits who arrived to help, state Dept of Transportation, state Air National Guard, local fire and police personnel, and local sheriffs.
- Throughout, Allen and Honore` emphasized open, ongoing communications. This, of course, is one of the keys to building relationships. Unlike some FEMA managers, they focused on the team's agreed-upon results, not on policies and procedures. Allen's pre-existing relationships with the individuals he brought from the Coast Guard were critical to dealing with an unprecedented emergency.

## **Michael Brown, Thad Allen: Hierarchical and Collaborative Mindsets**

As painful as Katrina was (and still is), its lessons are powerful for anyone interested in collaboration and crisis leadership. The graphic (below) captures the key differences between the approaches that Michael Brown and Thad Allen used in dealing with the great storm. My point isn't to portray one as a superhuman hero and the other totally responsible for inept

government responses to a massive storm. No single person was responsible for either the failures or the successes (of which there were many). The reason for contrasting Brown's and Allen's leadership styles is simply this: their performance during Katrina reflect key differences between a bureaucratic- hierarchical style, and a collaborative approach. In a world of increasing complexity, turbulence, unpredictable crises and chaos, Allen's collaborative approach is one we need to learn.

## Dealing with Katrina: Michael Brown, Thad Allen

	<b>Michael Brown</b>	<b>Thad Allen</b>
<b>Focus</b>	Manage his agency	Lead a network
<b>Key assumptions</b>	Can only use formal authority to accomplish goals	Can use relationships, influence, the media, peer pressure to achieve goals
	Need senior leader support to succeed	Need strong partnerships pulling in same general direction to succeed
	Go by the book	Be flexible, use requirements of the situation to set your course
<b>Communications</b>	Control the message tightly	"Shine a light" on the operations, show the public your work
<b>Political power</b>	Must have access to senior leaders to have power	You gain power by listening, speaking truth to those with power, making good on the promise, and delivering results

Note: for an excellent and detailed discussion of the different approaches used by Allen and Brown, see: *The next government of the United States: Why our institutions fail us and how to fix them*, by Don Kettl. Norton Publishers, 2009.

**Questions for discussion:**

**1. Why do you think Thad Allen's approach worked so much better than Michael Brown's in this situation?**

**2. In general, what are the potential pros and cons of a collaborative, and a hierarchical leadership style?**