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Crucible Experience  
L200  
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In many of my graduate classes at Kansas State University and throughout the leadership curriculum here at the Command and General Staff College, a central theme that continually emerges is the importance of critical reflection. Several readings and classroom discussions have suggested that our ability to critically reflect on our experiences is an integral part to learning and development as adults and leaders. I have also learned that all experiences have the potential to be educational and that all learning involves some degree of emotion. Critical reflection helps us identify the lessons to be learned from our experiences and to understand the emotions that we have during these events. Moreover, as leaders, it helps us to reanalyze and perhaps redefine ourselves and our organizations. In our Leadership reading, *Crucibles of Leadership*, Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas describe a “crucible experience” as an occasion in which an event or series of events cause us to critically reflect and subsequently change ourselves for the better. One such experience for me occurred in Iraq in May of 2006 when, while serving as a reconnaissance troop commander, an IED detonation took the life of one of my soldiers and seriously wounded two others. This incident can be described as a crucible experience because the critical reflection on the manner in which I reacted to this incident has greatly influenced my leadership style, beliefs, and behavior. Thus the incident contributed to my being a better leader at the organizational level.

My immediate reaction to the event was one of anger and distrust of the Iraqis in my area of operations. In the weeks that followed, my emotions enveloped the rest of the troop and my soldiers and I quickly became very aggressive in the conduct of our tactical operations. During one particular raid, my troop was tasked to capture an individual with ties to the IED network responsible for the explosives that killed and wounded my soldiers. We did not find the target individual at his house and my soldiers and I became quite forceful in our search of the residence

and questioning of the target individual's family. It was during the questioning of the subject's father that I was strangely reminded of some of the stories that my grandmother would tell about the German Army soldier's behavior in her Italian town during World War II. The people of her southern Italian town of Capua were subjected to great hardships at the hands of the Germans; not the least of which was the execution of her father and thirty-nine other men as punishment for one Italian man's defense of his daughter from an attempted rape by two German soldiers. I imagined the stories that the Iraqi children witnessing the interrogation of this Iraqi man would tell their children and grandchildren. Despite the fact that my soldiers and I had not technically committed any war crimes, I had the odd sense that these stories would be similar to my grandmother's; except in the Iraq version, I would play the role of the German. I then began to imagine my grandmother's reaction to what I was doing. At this point I gathered my soldiers and returned to the base. I did not talk to my soldiers as I should have, but I did take pains to insure that for the rest of our deployment, we would not repeat that behavior.

Over the course of the next two years, I thought very often and deeply about that particular raid; however, it was not until I began my graduate studies at Kansas State University that I understood such thought to be critical reflection. The contemplation of the meaning of the emotions I felt and the actions I took in Iraq resulted in my reaching several conclusions. These conclusions characterize a transformation in my leadership philosophy that will most definitely influence my actions as an organizational leader in future assignments. To begin with, I concluded that no one is either all good or all bad and wars cannot be defined as battles of good versus evil. We must, therefore, make an effort to not stereotype, generalize or classify what is foreign to us as bad because, more often than not, these determinations are based on ignorance. In other words, we cannot always assume that, as American soldiers, we automatically possess

the moral high ground and all who oppose us must naturally be malevolent. In organizational leadership, I believe this translates into insuring that the organization does view situations generically through the lens of an ethnocentric definition of right and wrong.

My second conclusion revolves around the relationship between a leader and his subordinates and how an organization determines what behavior is to be tolerated. In determining acceptable behavior, subordinates very often take their cues from the organization's leader. In the weeks following the death of my soldier, any anger and hatred that my soldiers may have felt individually was amplified by the sentiments that I was espousing. Consequently, I set a toxic climate in the organization in which aggressive actions towards Iraqis was perceived to be acceptable and even desired. The old adage of "lead by example" is too often thought of in the framework of overt acts such as displaying courage on the battlefield or insuring ethical use of funds and government equipment. However, in reflecting on my experiences in Iraq, I realized that leaders, especially at the organizational level, must understand that "lead by example" applies to sentiments, words and attitudes as well. Although organizational leaders may not be physically leading formations, their subordinate tactical leaders can easily translate their sentiments, words and attitudes into actions.

Consideration of the fact that my emotions had amplified those of my subordinates led me to my final conclusion in regards to this experience: emotion will always play a role. My experiences in Iraq led me to believe that the notion of action based entirely on rational thought is a fallacy. While training, soldiers are taught the necessity of separating emotion from behavior, but my experiences are that in actual application this concept is rarely, if at all, feasible. This essentially means that as organizational leaders we have a responsibility to recognize and understand the emotions of the subordinates in our organization and the effect on

their actions. Therefore, in determining what we want our organization be like, we must factor in how our subordinates feel and what they need emotionally.

In conclusion, the unfortunate event of having soldiers killed and wounded in combat was a crucible experience for me because it was the starting point of a self examination that has resulted in a transformation of many aspects of my leadership style, beliefs, and behavior that will ultimately contribute to my being a better organizational leader. Of course, it cannot be ignored that the kind of self examination that results in positive transformation is only possible when we are afforded the time to critically reflect. Until recently, I had rather cursed my time here at Fort Leavenworth, both at BCTP and CGSC, because I believed that I needed to get back to the war as soon as possible. However, in retrospect, I now see the benefit of the last three years and not the least of which is the time that I have been given to reflect on my experiences in Iraq and how they have shaped the soldier, leader and human being that I am.