

## Crucible Essay

“Please sign your name on this Letter of Concern,” my brigade commander directed. I was four months into battery command, and I felt as though events were spiraling out of my control. For the first time in my short career, I felt as though I failed as a leader. I did not think things could get any worse, but I was wrong. The following night I received a phone call, and I was told one of my Soldiers committed suicide. Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas define crucible leadership experiences as unplanned transformational leadership challenges which cause deep reflection and change. (Bennis & Thomas, p. 411) My crucible leadership experience occurred over nine days in March of 2005. It wasn't until years later, and after considerable thought, that I realized how the events impacted my view point on leadership and my perception of myself. Now, looking forward to my future role as an organizational leader, I realize there are applicable lessons learned which I can apply. My crucible leadership experience illustrated the importance of culture and climate, organizational stress, and self preparation which I will use as an organizational leader in the Army and beyond.

My crucible leadership experience was not one single event, but a series of events occurring over a nine period. At the end of my crucible, my battery was within twenty five days of deploying to Afghanistan with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division as part of Operation Enduring Freedom VI (OEF VI). My crucible began when two of my Soldiers were arrested for Driving Under the Influence (DUI) within five days of each other. The following Monday, a different Soldier refused to exit an aircraft during a training jump. The Soldier had not completed a training jump in over six months, and was therefore required to attend basic airborne refresher (BAR) training prior to his next jump. I had failed to ensure he was prepared to safely execute his jump. The sequence of events ended two nights later when one of my Soldiers, a forward observer, committed suicide. Any one of these events occurring during command might represent a crucible leadership experience; however, they occurred over the course of nine days which led me to question my abilities as a leader. Not only did I question my abilities, but I

## Crucible Essay

received a letter of concern which provided a written reminder that my brigade commander questioned my ability to lead. My own self doubt was increased by the loss of life in my battery, and left me wondering what I could have done to prevent my Soldier from committing suicide. With a short time until the deployment I felt I had loss control of my unit, and questioned whether I was qualified for the incredible responsibility of leading the unit through a combat tour. In time I was able to examine the valuable lessons learned from those experiences which I often reflect upon.

My experiences in command illustrated the importance in understanding, monitoring, and influencing the culture and climate in organizations. Culture is often defined as shared beliefs and values, and is generally something that develops over time. (FM 6-22, p. 6-7) Climate is shared perceptions or attitudes within an organization, is shorter in term, and can fluctuate over time. (Fm 6-22, p. 8-1) Prior to command, I understood that certain units possessed their own unique culture, which is certainly true in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. However, I did not make an effort to understand the climate I was operating in as a new commander. As I assumed command, I focused my efforts in the upcoming deployment while neglecting this critical aspect of leadership. Although I conducted the required command climate surveys, I never took the time to look thoroughly evaluate them. While I was focused on training and deployment tasks, I missed opportunities to examine the culture and climate within my battery. As I progress into larger organizations, I have a clear understanding of how important climate and culture is and the impacts they have on a unit. As a field grade officer, removed from a direct style of leadership, I know setting the example and taking actions which contribute to a positive climate and culture is one of the largest ways I can influence an organization. Identifying the current climate and the culture within the organization are tasks which are equally as important as preparing for a deployment, and they require time and commitment. I understand as a leader it is critical to monitor the climate and culture, and if the

## Crucible Essay

culture has deviated from a positive environment, it is the leader's responsibility to recognize this, and take action. (Schein and Bass, p. 132).

The ability to identify, manage, and reduce stress is a valuable skill which I will apply as I assume various roles as an organizational leader. Understanding the amounts and types of stress in any organization is critical in leading it to success. While I felt various levels of stress during my first four months of command, I was unable to understand the stress created by the impending deployment and the significant impact it had on the battery. Without a doubt, the string of events I experienced were a direct result of stress in the unit. Identification of stress is a leadership challenge that is equally important for direct and organizational level leaders. (McCollum and Broaddus, p. 220) While a certain level of stress is beneficial to achieving peak performance near the "halo" area, leaders must find the critical balance in order achieve the peak performance. (McCollum and Broaddus, p. 222) As an organizational leader it imperative that I am attentive to potentially stressful situations and the impact they have on Soldiers and junior leaders. With a reduced span of control and a greater influence at the organizational level, it is increasingly important to guide junior leaders to identify and assist Soldiers that may be experiencing unhealthy levels of stress. Stress will always exist in every "leadership environment." (FM 6-22, p. 10-7) It is imperative for leaders to identify and manage the stress levels in order to assist the organization in achieving its goals, as well as maintaining the well being of Soldiers within the organization.

The Army has identified eight core leadership competencies, and preparing self is the sixth competency. (FM 6-22, p. 2-7) My crucible experience taught me the importance in preparing oneself as a leader, and it is that competency which I will carry forth and apply in my career. In the months leading to command, I prepared in various ways. I studied artillery field manuals, became familiar with unit tactical standard operating procedures (SOPs), and took various leader safety certification tests. My preparation was focused on technical and tactical

## Crucible Essay

aspects of the position. I neglected to prepare in other areas such as developing my command philosophy, preparing initial counseling for my leaders, and examining the direction I wished to lead the battery. While all leadership positions require a certain level of technical proficiency, the technical and tactical aspects are now one of many important areas I must prepare in as I assume leadership roles at the organizational level. Self preparation as an organizational leader must encompass a thorough understanding of the organization, the path the organization is taking, and how to guide the organization. (FM 6-22, p. 11-5) Additionally, at the organizational level it is important to understand the impacts my actions have on the organization, and how they are perceived by those in the unit. (FM 6-22, p. 8-8)

My crucible leadership experience spanned nine demanding days, at the end of which I was fortunate to still possess a battery command. In the end, it took a great deal of time to understand the impacts the experience had on my perspective of leadership and my how I view my role as a leader. I learned many lessons and believe there are numerous things I would do differently. The experience impressed upon me the importance of understanding and assessing the culture and climate of an organization, recognizing and managing stress, and the value in meticulous preparation for all leadership positions. These represent many of the lessons I will apply as an organizational leader in the future.

## Crucible Essay

### Bibliography

Bennis, Howard G., and Robert J. Thomas. "Crucibles in Leadership" *Harvard Business Review At Large* 411 (2002): 39-45. Reprinted in the US Army Command and General Staff College, *L100 Book of Readings*, 410-415. Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC, August 2009.

McCollum, Bill, and Matthew Broaddus. "Leader Self-Imposed Stress in Organizations: Do You Improve Your Organization, or Detract From Success" 220 (2009): 219-226. Reprinted in the US Army Command and General Staff College, *L100 Book of Readings*, 220-226. Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC, August 2009.

Schein, Edgar H., and Josey Bass. *Organizational Culture and Leadership* 131 (1992): 131-137. Reprinted in the US Army Command and General Staff College, *L100 Book of Readings*, 131-137. Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC, August 2009.

US Department of the Army. FM 6-22, Army Leadership. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. October 2006.