

# Complex and Chaotic Events Require Adaptive Interaction and An Adaptive Response

By Fred Leland

This article is published in the current Spring 2014 CATO news, the official publication of the California Association of Tactical Officers. It was both an honor and privilege to have it published in this professional journal. Republished here with permission.

An organization that tries to be in control of everything will not be successful in crisis.

In our efforts to bring order to chaos, the overwhelming focus is to gain control of everything possible. We attempt to control the first responders: the police, fire, EMS and the bystanders who take initiative to help in the response. We intend to control the victims and the bad guys. We angle to control the media that are intent on getting the story. We wish to control the response from families and friends, who are overwhelmed with emotion and fear. We endeavor to collect and gather information that may shed light on the situation and those involved. We then analyze the information and distribute it to those who need to know. We plan to control everything in an instant even as we are maneuvering initially to contact the problem, mobilize our resources and set up our long term responses and command and control systems.

In doing so, we are stifling the effectiveness of our responses because of our efforts to control.

Quite frankly, leaders in law enforcement must become much more comfortable with being in command and out of control. This does not mean we have a free reign and anyone responding to a crisis does whatever he pleases. There needs to be a clear mission, intent and focus. The need for command arises from—and varies with—the size complexity and differentiation of a law enforcement agency and the size and scope of the crisis. A one-man response requires no command, at least not in the sense that a 100-man, mutual-aid response does.

The exercise of command involves a great many things, not all of which can be clearly separated from each other. There is, in the first place, the gathering of information on friendly forces and their response, a problem that we should not underestimate. We must also gather information on our adversary and on external factors such as weather and the environment or terrain. One man in command cannot have control over all these colliding factors.

Crisis is not a linear cause-and-effect situation. It has a non-linear and cascading effect that can only be influenced, shaped and reshaped by rapid and sound observations, orientations, decisions and actions—by people on the ground, closest to

the action who are processing what's happening in real time. We saw the effect of being in command and out of control, at the initial response to the Boston Marathon bombing last year. Immediately after the explosions, people responded without bosses telling them what to do and where to go; they just did what they knew how to do. Yes, they were prepared for emergency responses—a command post was part of the pre-race planning. But they were preparing for marathon injuries and illnesses, not a terrorist attack. Regardless, that initial response was close to flawless and no bosses directed a thing.

This type of adaptable response illustrates the success of having a common goal, a common mission and robust preparation. This is in contrast to a leader attempting to "puppet master" all the people into the right places, rather than preparing his team beforehand and having the faith and trust to set them free to do what they know how to do. Being in command and out of control is rooted in organizations that have developed a high level of mutual trust. Mutual trust is the internal harmony that converts a mob into a team. It underlies all components of learning organizations and lubricates the response system so it can work through real-time problems in a timely and effective way. We have seen the power of mutual trust win wars and it has a similarly profound effect in other human outcomes. It's too important a concept for policing to ignore.

*"... the first thing I told our staff is that we would be in command and out of control. By that, I mean that the overall guidance and the intent were provided by me and the senior leadership, but the forces in the field wouldn't depend on intricate orders coming from the top. They were to use their own initiative and be innovative as they went forward ..."*

—General Paul Van Riper, US Marine Commander

Only open systems can adapt adequately to change, so an organism needs to maintain interaction with its environment if it is to survive, writes Frans P.B. Osinga, in his book "Science Strategy and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd. This open systems theory, when applied to the street or to conflict and crisis response, means we are open to continued learning exploring the current situation with all our senses and experimenting with tactical options rather than solely applying solutions to text book scenarios. This requires responders be adaptable and able to make effective change to an altered salutation. Leaders must understand that attempting to control responses hinders adaptability, creates friction and slows decision making which

is detrimental to effective responses.

Organizations such as police departments must take responsibility for how they lead, educate and train their officers if they are to thrive in the chaos and uncertainty of crisis and conflict. No longer is the policy- and procedural-driven disposition that has engulfed policing over the past 25 years good enough at handling the adaptive challenges we face in crisis and conflict. Especially in the initial stages, when uncertainty and chaos are creating disorder at its greatest level, we need actively thinking responders who possess the explorer and experimental mindset. We are starting to see our profession evolving ever so slowly toward this understanding.

The California POST steering committee "Edge of Chaos" concept definition of crisis response is to: "Improve the Incident Commander's ability to function within the "golden hour" of critical incidents. This "golden hour" is defined as the chaotic stage of an incident in which the crisis is still fluid, meaningful information is difficult to obtain and situational awareness seemingly impossible to establish. In this initial period, it is difficult to determine how to set multiple people, groups and agencies on a path towards resolution."

Ultimately this group's focus is about leadership and developing the ability to make good decisions in extreme conditions while applying intuitive, sensible strategies aimed at working through chaos and toward the implementation of productive operational incident command. In other words

they are beginning to develop first responders who are indeed problem solvers by teaching them how to think instead of telling them what to think.

This is important definition because there are already ideas on how to create and nurture adaptability in the changing face of crisis and conflict; it's described as adaptive leadership. The theories of Col. John Boyd, his briefing titled "Organic Design for Command and Control" advocates the type of command structure and command climate focused on leadership and appreciation that inspires unity and cohesion. I describe this as mutual trust. It's what I believe will help police thrive in complex and chaotic situations.

The only tools we have right now to solve these complex situations are the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the Incident Command System (ICS). ICS/NIMS are top-down oriented and rigid despite the effort and mantra that it is grown from the ground up and meant to be flexible. All too often responders and incident commanders are overly concerned with the process of ICS and setting up structures (command posts, staging areas, rally points, etc.), which affect the fluidity of the initial course of action.

"Each episode of crisis is the temporary result of a unique combination of circumstances, presenting a unique set of problems and requiring original solution. Nevertheless no episode can be viewed in isolation. Rather, each episode merges with those that precede and follow it, shaped by



**ISPFCU**  
Your Law Enforcement Credit Union

## Enjoy your savings with ISPFCU Summer Fun Loan specials!

An ISPFCU Summer Fun Loan is a great way to get the funds you need for just about anything that contributes to summer fun. For all new qualifying loans this summer, members will automatically receive a 0.50% rate deduction from our already low loan rates which include:

- Auto Loans as low as 1.99%\* with free 90 day payment deferment
- Motorcycle Loans as low as 3.99%\* with free 90 day payment deferment
- Fixed Rate Home Equity Loans as low as 2.25%\*
- Boat Loans as low as 2.99%\*
- RV Loans as low as 2.99%\* and much more!

In addition, if you currently have a title secured loan financed at another financial institution you can refinance it with an ISPFCU Summer Fun Loan and we'll beat your current rate by at least 1.00%!\*

Call us at 800-255-0886 or apply online at [www.ispfcu.org](http://www.ispfcu.org) to get your Summer Fun Loan today!

\*This offer is for a limited time only. All rates are stated as an Annual Percentage Rate (APR). Rates are subject to change at any time. First Mortgage and VISA do not qualify. Special applies to new non-ISPFCU loans. Lowest possible rate is 1.99% APR. Offers cannot be combined. Offer ends 09/02/2014.

Federally Insured by NCUA

---

the former and shaping conditions of the latter, creating a continuous, fluctuating flow of activity chock-full with fleeting opportunities and unforeseen events.”

Because crisis and conflict are fluid phenomenon, response to crisis and conflict requires flexibility of thought. Success depends in large part on the ability to adapt—to proactively shape changing events to our advantage—as well as to react quickly to constantly changing conditions.

Before applying the ICS structure, first responders can help resolve or minimize the crisis by gathering real-time information that reduces the uncertainty and disorder that attracts the right course of action. Beyond that, first responders can create and nurture adaptability throughout the organization. Not everyone has the skill set to do that, but it can be developed and influenced with the right training and education and adaptive leadership.

What can we distill from our current culture that to make people successful at handling unconventional crisis? What skills should we nurture?

The theory to help us in this arena is already out there. We need to adapt it to our culture. That takes hard work and time. We did not form the top-down leadership structures overnight, nor can we overnight change to a bottom-up culture. Engaging others in developing new values and principles evolved over time in an effort to continuously improve step by step, is what it will take.

### **Organic Design for Command and Control**

Boyd proposed a set of command and control thinking principles that he included in his “Organic Design for Command and Control” briefing.

#### **The fundamentals he emphasized include:**

- The insight and vision to unveil adversary plans and action as well as to foresee your own goals and appropriate plans and actions.
- The focus and direction to achieve some goal or aim.
- The adaptability to cope with uncertain and ever changing circumstances.
- The security to remain unpredictable.

#### **As Boyd explains**

“Without insight and vision there can be no orientation to deal with both present and future. Without focus and direction, implied or explicit, there can be neither harmony of effort nor initiative for vigorous effort. Adaptability implies variety and rapidity. Without variety and rapidity one can neither be unpredictable nor cope with changing and unforeseen circumstances. Without security one becomes predictable, hence one loses the benefits of the above.”

When you are dealing with adaptive challenges, which are what conflict and crisis are made up of, there is no obvious answer to the question: “What is going on here?” Trying

to define the problem at hand is a contentious act in itself. Leading through this uncertainty requires courage, tenacity, and an experimental mind-set: You try things out, see what happens, and make changes accordingly. When you adopt an experimental/explorer mind-set, you actively commit to an intervention you have designed while not becoming wedded to it. That way, if it misses the mark, you do not feel compelled to defend it, and instead you are adaptable. This mind-set also opens you to other, unanticipated possibilities or other tactical options.

Being in command and out of control requires adaptive leadership and bottom-up decision making by highly trained and developed professionals. It’s a command system that will allow you to foster harmony and initiative while maintaining variety and rapidity to exploit opportunities to get things done. Unfolding conflict situations require leaders be in command and out of control...are you? 🌀

#### **Resources for the article:**

- Science Strategy and War: The Strategic theory of John Boyd by Frans P.B. Osinga, available on Amazon
- United States Marine Corps Warfighting Manual, available on Amazon
- Raising the Bar: Creating and Nurturing Adaptability in the Changing Face of War by Don Vandergriff, available on Amazon
- Col John Boyd’s briefings available at [http://www. ausairpower.net/APA-Boyd-Papers.html](http://www.ausairpower.net/APA-Boyd-Papers.html)
- <http://www.lesc.net/blog/command-and-out-control>

#### **About the Author**

Fred T. Leland, Jr. is the Founder and Principal Trainer of LESC: Law Enforcement & Security Consulting ([www.lesc.net](http://www.lesc.net)). He is the author of “*Adaptive Leadership Handbook: Innovative Ways to Teach and Develop Your People*”, written for police and security professionals, published in January 2014, and is available on Amazon. In addition to his work with LESC, Fred Leland is an active Lieutenant with the Walpole (MA) Police Department. He previously worked as a deputy with the Charlotte County (FL) Sheriff’s Department and before that spent six years with the United States Marines including as a squad leader in Beirut, Lebanon. Leland is an accomplished trainer with more than 28 years’ experience teaching law enforcement, military and security professionals. His programs of instruction include handling dynamic encounters; threat assessment; nonverbal communications; decision making under pressure; evolving threats; violence prevention; firearms; use of force; officer created jeopardy and adaptive leadership. He is also a 2004 graduate of the FBI National Academy Class 216, and a current instructor for the Massachusetts Municipal Police Training Committee. Outcomes based training and education (OBTE) is his approach to creating and nurturing decision makers to observe, orient, decide and act while considering consequences.