

Key Lessons from Mega Disasters: The Haiyan/Yolanda Experience

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Abstract

There is the continuing quest for lessons to enable man to recover and rehabilitate from the devastations from mega disasters. Anchored on the systems theory and using a descriptive method, this case study focused on the key lessons learned by the Mayor of Tanauan, Leyte as he led his town to rise from the destruction of Super Typhoon Haiyan. Investigating the interview through narrative analysis, he categorized the work into two major phases. 1) Relief Phase: Emergency provision of food and potable water; medical care; temporary shelters; assure security and immediate clearing operations, and; restoration of power supply, and;. 2) Rehabilitation and Recovery Phase: Building Back Better damages on permanent shelter, public infrastructure and livelihood. The 4 key lessons were: 1) Proactiveness; 2) Priority Setting; 3) Community-driven and Collaboration, and; 4) Personal Leadership. These lessons ought to be disseminated as these may save properties and lives

Key words: *Leadership in Disaster Management; Relief, Rehabilitation and Recovery; Case Study; Community-driven and Collaboration; Tanauan, Leyte Philippines*

Introduction

Leadership can be viewed from various perspectives. Kelloway & Barling (2010) define leadership as a process of social influence that is enacted by individuals in formal positions of power or leadership positions within an organization, such as managers and supervisors. Although leadership is not confined to individuals in formal leadership positions, it is argued that these individuals may have a particularly wide influence within an organization. Northouse (2010) asserted two (2) main characteristics of all the conceptualizations of leadership, namely: 1) Leadership is a process that involves influence, and; 2) Leadership occurs in groups and involves common goals and purpose. He defines leadership “*a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.*”

Leadership is tested in times of crises. These crises can be man-made or induced by nature. According to Demiroz and Kapucu (2012) leadership in managing disasters and emergencies can minimize the damage inflicted by an event whilst lack of successful leadership exacerbates the impact. Leaders should have certain skills and abilities in order to manage catastrophes based on the environmental conditions, organizations they lead and scope of the disaster.

The intensity or magnitude of disasters differ. In small emergencies the local emergency responders are capable of handling response. Moderately sized emergencies are already classified as disasters as they usually lead to loss of life and property and the local level is not totally able to handle the crises. Aid and assistance must come from the provincial and national levels. The highest classification of emergency is that of a catastrophe. In this extreme crisis the international community, governments and non-government organizations come in to give aid and assistance to the victims.

The disasters may be small, moderate, or intense in classification, yet there are always lessons to be learned from them to enable the responders, particularly the leaders may be better equipped and prepared to face future disasters.

Typhoon Haiyan, locally named Typhoon Yolanda was already a typhoon with super strength before it entered the Philippine Area of Responsibility (PAR). The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) reported that Typhoon Yolanda was both huge and powerful with well-formed eye typical of a very strong typhoon. Haiyan/Yolanda made its first landfall in Guiuan, Eastern Samar at 4:40 in the morning of November 8, 2013.

The second landfall was in Tolosa, Leyte at 7:00 in the morning. Tolosa, Leyte is just around 5-6 kilometers south of the town of Tanauan. Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda was one of the strongest storms ever recorded, with wind speeds of more than 300 kilometers per hour (km/h) and storm surges of over four meters. It caused widespread flooding and landslides, which brought about thousands of deaths and unprecedented damage to the affected areas. Most places remained isolated and without aid for days due to impassable roads, widespread power outage, and damaged communication and transportation facilities (CBRP).

Proclamation No.682 declaring a national state of calamity was issued by then President Benigno S. Aquino III on November 11, 2013 after he witnessed the extent of the devastation brought by the super typhoon. All concerned government agencies initiated rescue, relief, rehabilitation, and recovery work in accordance with pertinent government operational plans and directives. Local and international organizations and volunteers also came together to extend assistance to the survivors of Super Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda and took part in what could be considered as one of the greatest concerted rescue, relief and recovery efforts witnessed in recent history.

The fury of Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) in Tanauan, Leyte

Tanauan, Leyte is a 2nd Class Municipality in the Province of Leyte with seven (7) coastal barangays. Its population stands at 53,310 with 12,386 households. It is politically subdivided into 54 barangays. Its core industries include Agriculture (Rice, Coconut, Fish): 280 Million; Industrial (Pepsi & New Edible Oil): 2,524 Million, and; Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). It has an annual budget of P103 million (2014).

Minutes after the wrath of typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda passed Tanauan and the water from the surge subsided, the magnitude of the damage was unimaginable. Tanauan, Leyte was one of the towns isolated for two (2) days. The whole town was severely affected. Communication lines to and from the town were down, even to the barangays as both the land lines and cell sites were toppled down and proved no match to the wrath of the typhoon. The over 320 km/hour wind of Typhoon Haiyan brought storm surge as high as 15-20 feet along the shorelines. Approximately 5-10 feet storm surge rushed about 1 kilometer inland submerging thirteen (13) barangays including the town center. One hundred percent (100%) of the households were affected (12,386). There were over 1375 dead and 57 missing persons. Damage to public infrastructure stood at a staggering 500 million and the loss in agriculture was at 135 million. The catastrophe brought utter uncertainty and despair to everyone.

As the water subsided and the wind started to wane, people started to troop to the town hall seeking for help, comfort and assurances. The dead were being brought to the town center but road to the cemetery was not passable as debris were all over. The people were seeking for answers, waiting and looking-up to their Mayor for guidance and direction. The challenges faced at that time seemed insurmountable. The immediate challenge was to give the dead the most decent burial possible otherwise epidemic could set-in. Food and water came next. Then, temporary shelter followed by security concerns. In all these aspects communication was very important to minimize the confusion and lessen the uncertainty. This became a test of leadership, on how to bring Tanauan and its people back to its feet and how to guide the people and the town back to recovery and rehabilitation given the dire situation; as well as to inspire the down trodden not to lose hope and provide leadership by example.

This study sought to know the key lessons learned by the local chief executive of Tanauan, Leyte from his personal experience before, during and after the onslaught of super typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda that brought the town and its people back on its feet and to recovery.

Related Literature

Boin and t'Hart (2003) in their article "Public Leadership in Times of Crisis: Mission Impossible?" identified three (3) lessons. Lesson 1. Leaders need to formulate a crisis-management philosophy, which can help to negotiate the inherent dilemma of reparation and reform; 2) Leaders should not push reform without considering opposite arguments. If they use the crisis to ignore critics, they will mobilize their own opposition at a time when their performance is already under scrutiny, and; 3) Crisis-induced reform creates exceptional challenges for the long term. These lessons were products of a research based on the comparison of the popular expectations from leaders during crises and the contrary findings in researches. This study gives focus on the lessons of one local chief executive as he guided his town and his people out of the misery brought by the devastation of typhoon Haiyan.

Lessons in leadership from the Fukushima Nuclear Disaster as narrated in the Initiative for Global Environmental Leadership Knowledge at Wharton, 3 October 2013, Special Report identified three (3)

lessons. Lesson 1: to prepare for the worst, leaders have to face up to what might actually occur; Lesson 2: In the midst of chaos, leaders should stop looking for control and start looking for answers, and; Lesson 3: In a crisis, leaders have to prevent panic and maintain credibility. Rehearsals help. These lessons were results of a man made catastrophe that could have been prevented while this study is about lessons from a catastrophic natural disaster.

Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina and Applied Later as presented in an article entitled *Perspectives on Disaster Responses, Case Study: Hurricane Katrina* the emphasis was on the transportation sector. The seven (7) lessons were: 1) The transit agency was now an integral part of the New Orleans City Assisted Evacuation Plan (CAEP); 2) New Orleans RTA used 40 transit buses to move 9,000+ people over two days; 3) there were 17 pickup points throughout New Orleans , then moved evacuees to the long haul evacuation site at the Union Passenger Terminal (UPT); 4) Transit agencies in evacuation destination cities also helped with local movement of evacuees; 5) The role of transit in movement of evacuees is critical – especially for the disabled and others who cannot self-evacuate; 6) Transit should have a role in emergency management plans – Transit should be represented at emergency operations centers (EOCs), and; 7) The Importance of Mutual-aid Agreements between transit systems – following the model of the utility industry - FTA/APTA ERPP example. The lessons focused on how to mobilize the transport sector to evacuate people out of harm’s way in times of impending disasters such as hurricanes. This study emphasized more on how to put the concerns of the town within the “radar-screen” of decision makers to facilitate the flow of relief efforts both humanitarian and others.

Boin, et al. (2005) as cited by Demiroz and Kapucu in their article entitled *Role of Leadership in Managing Emergencies and Disasters*, focused on 5 key tasks to be successful in crisis leadership, specifically: 1) Sense making – it is the leaders responsibility to look at the possibility of crises, handle preparations and eliminate what could have been avoided; 2) Decision Making and Coordinating Implementation - it is the leaders’ responsibility to make final decisions, to make sure that they reach out to the community and gather as many interested crisis responders; 3) Meaning making – leaders are in the limelight to direct the public in the right direction; 4) Accounting and ending – keeping the affected parties on track to eventually achieve closure and move on past the crisis, and; 5) Learning – the leaders must evaluate the situation and come up with lessons that can be learned from either shortfalls or the successes of the entire response efforts. This study focused on the lessons learned by a local chief executive amidst the onslaught brought by typhoon Haiyan to his town and to its people.

This study is anchored on the system theory as a framework. Ludwig von Bertalanffy as cited by Meadows (2009) claims that systems thinking is an important 21st century skill. It is the ability to think about a system as a whole, rather than only thinking about its individual parts. The world is a complex system; there is a need to promote the understanding of its interconnected pieces and relationships. Many other entities such as organizations, schools, and cities — or phenomena occurring in nature such as climate

change, the Milky Way galaxy, or systems in the human body like the digestive system — should be viewed in terms of systems. Systems thinking can be described as the ability to think about a system as a whole, rather than only thinking about its individual parts. The system theory as used in this study pertains to the holistic approach adapted by the local chief executive of Tanauan, Leyte in his efforts to rebuild his hometown from the rubbles of the Haiyan disaster. His tactic in convincing local, national and international, government and non-government support and channeling the same direct to beneficiaries for maximum impact reflects the actual application of the system theory.

Methodology

Using the descriptive case study method (Baxter & Jack, 2008), this study sought to present the key lessons learned by the local chief executive of Tanauan, Leyte before, during and after the destruction brought by super typhoon Haiyan. These key lessons were the pillars in bringing the town into the national and international limelight as it went leaps and bounds in its recovery and rehabilitation efforts. Personal interview with the local chief executive and personal observations on how he conducted the affairs of his office in the middle of the crisis were the main data gathering techniques used.

Results

Personal background of the Local Chief Executive

Honorable Pelagio Rudas Tecson, Jr., 47 years old, is the Local Chief Executive or town Mayor of Tanauan, Leyte. He was elected into public office on May 2013 and assumed office on June 30, 2013. His administration was barely 4 months and 7 days when the super typhoon unleashed its fury on his hapless town of Tanauan, Leyte. He was a Citizen Scout Awardee (Eagle Scout) of the Boy Scouts of the Philippines (BSP) and the recipient of the Gerry Roxas Leadership Award in High School. He was a student leader both in High School and College and served as President of the Supreme Student Council (SSC) of the Divine Word University. He has a Degree in Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering (BSCE). His background in local politics is strong as his father served the town as local chief executive for nearly 30 years. He also served as a youth leader in the town during his college days. He distinguished himself in the field of business when he got hired by the Multi-national company Procter and Gamble, Inc. after his graduation in college. He rose from being a Section Manager in 1989 covering the Samar Provinces in Region VIII in the Philippines to ASIA Associate Director for Market Strategy and Planning (2009-2012), Procter and Gamble, ASIA, covering the ASEAN member countries. His work exposed him to many Leadership trainings, allowed him to travel to many countries and keenly observe the styles of leadership that allowed countries to prosper. His experience and realizations in the corporate world awakened his long desire to be of service to his hometown, like his father. That opportunity came in the elections of May 2013.

Mayor Pelagio R. Tecson, Jr. categorized the work after the mega-disaster into two major phases. First, Emergency Phase: Focus is on the provision of food and potable water; medical care for those in

need; temporary shelter for those who lost their dwellings; ensure sense of security among the people and immediately start the clearing operations, and; restore the power supply as soon as possible. Second, Rehabilitation and Recovery Phase: Primary consideration is Building Back Better what was damaged, particularly the permanent shelter, public infrastructure and livelihood.

Mayor Tecson shared 4 Key Lessons he learned after the mega-disaster that was Super typhoon Haiyan, specifically: 1) Proactiveness; 2) Priority Setting; 3) Community-driven and Collaboration, and; 4) Personal Leadership.

Proactiveness for Mayor Tecson simply means “Empowerment.” He believes that empowering people will generate more involvement from the community. Empowerment entails that training and time to practice be afforded the community-based volunteers. At the local level, when ordinary people become part of a training it creates curiosity and awareness among the locals. In times of crises, it brings out the “Bayanihan” Spirit in the community. This also include the formation of the “Disaster response council” in every barangay and providing them correct information on impending disasters and proper training and equipment to face the said threats thereby mitigating its impact. This would also give the barangays it first responders. This would also include the training of the Barangay officials form the 54 barangays of the town. Another source of manpower is the over 2400 KALAHI-CIDDS volunteers. These volunteers can easily be mobilized and deployed to provide the needed hand in disaster response situations.

Priority-setting is an essential step towards a focused response to disasters. This has to happen in immediately after a rapid assessment of the magnitude of the disaster. In major disasters such that of Haiyan Mayor Tecson identified a 5-point priorities during the emergency phase, specifically: 1) food and water; 2) medical care; 3) temporary shelter; 4) security and clearing, and; 5) restoration of power supply. People devastated by a supertyphoon immediately need food and water after their harrowing experiences. This is an important intervention to give them enough strength to face the aftermath. Those who got injured need medical attention. In an event medical practitioners and emergency responders are not available due to being victims of the calamity themselves, leaders must be able to assure them that medical help is coming. Mobilize and organize an area for medical care. This will give the much needed hope to those with medical needs. Another basic need is shelter. When the houses are destroyed the necessary response is temporary shelter. The stay in the temporary shelter should be time-bounded as health problems are bound to happen if they are not transferred to permanent relocation structures. Security of the community is equally important as properties, life and limb have to be protected. Clearing of the debris is another daunting task but has to be done immediately. A clean surroundings after a calamity gives immeasurable hope to the desperate. The restoration of power supply to the affected areas is a vital victory as this uplifts the spirits of the disheartened victims of the calamity. This might be due to a larger extent to the dependence of people to electricity.

Community-driven & Collaboration is another key lesson learned. The concerned communities must be convinced as to what they are to do. Leaders only need to guide and direct them to have focus on the problems they face and the possible solutions available. This was clearly experienced in the problem of shelter after the onslaught of Haiyan. Families with more sturdy houses welcomed their neighbors, relatives or otherwise into their own abodes. Providing them roof for several nights and gladly shared their food. The clean-up drive in the aftermath likewise showed collaboration among peoples of different creeds. The security of the community was also made possible by the collaboration among the residents. The surge of fake news about people with bad intentions prowling the barangays intensified the anxiety among the residents. This instance brought the residents together to protect their territories. They devised ways to ensure security among them and within their barangays by strengthening patrols, creating noise at certain pre-determined time, and close coordination among the citizens, barangay police and barangay officials.

Another critical lesson was Personal Leadership. “If it is to be, it is up to me.” My basic learning at the end of the day, it boils down to me, as a leader. I cannot blame anybody for my failures. If I fail, it is because I failed. No excuses. Thus, I have to impose upon myself the burden of leading by example. If I want us to succeed, I must lead the way. In those times of uncertainty, it was my belief that in order for us to get the help that we needed I needed to put Tanauan in the “radar screen” of the decision-makers both with the government and private sectors. It was my responsibility to present the real situation of our town, the predicaments that we faced, the help that we needed in every available opportunity and try to persuade them to come to our aid. The waiting-game and blaming-game will not produce anything positive. Leaders must be proactive. In times of catastrophes, actions of leaders must reflect the “sense of urgency” to get things done. To find solutions to pressing problems. Leaders should be at the fore front of the “action” so that others will follow. Lead and then give guidance and direction. Once the decision-makers are convinced that they are dealing with a leader, you will be in their “radar screen” and every time they have something, you are always considered in their decision-making. That is why, Tanauan, since typhoon Haiyan, became the recipient of so many firsts, that even to the present, other local chief executives would come to confer on how to get or avail of assistance from line government agencies.

Conclusions

The leadership background of the local chief executive during his high school days, his leadership involvement in the university, his training and actual hands-on experience on leadership in a multi-national company proved to be relevant in his handling a crisis situation such as the super typhoon Haiyan.

Work after the mega-disaster can be divided into two major phases. First, Emergency Phase: Focus is on the provision of food and potable water; medical care for those in need; temporary shelter for those who lost their dwellings; ensure sense of security among the people and immediately start the clearing operations, and; restore the power supply as soon as possible. Second, Rehabilitation and Recovery Phase: Primary consideration is Building Back Better what was damaged, particularly the permanent shelter, public infrastructure and livelihood.

The 4 Key Lessons learned by Mayor Tecson after the mega-disaster that was Super typhoon Haiyan, specifically: 1) Proactiveness; 2) Priority Setting; 3) Community-driven and Collaboration, and; 4) Personal Leadership are reflective of the concept of systems theory. These lessons, taken as a whole, proves that from initial preparations to emergency phase, priority setting, community involvement and collaboration to rehabilitation and recovery phase would always include personal leadership.

These lessons need to be known to others, particularly local leaders, as it may provide them with a guide when they prepare and brace for mega-disasters in the future.

Acknowledgements

This paper was made possible through the help of the Honorable Pelagio R. Tecson, Jr., Mayor of Tanauan, Leyte and his wife Penelope. My colleagues at the Leyte Normal University, Tacloban City particularly Dr. Jude A. Duarte, University President. Special Thanks to my wife, my inspiration, my all, Rafaelita Cumpio-Mazo. Gratitude also goes to my “in-house” editor, my mother Dr. Leatriz Nielo-Mazo and my late father Dr. Jose V. Mazo, Sr. (+).

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