



Deepwater Horizon Response Leaders Address NPLI

By Eric J. McNulty

Participants in the closing class session of Cohort VI of the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative (NPLI) received an insider's view of the [Deepwater Horizon oil spill](#) in the Gulf of Mexico: two in this year's cohort have been helping to lead the response. Coast Guard Rear Admiral Mary Landry and Louisiana's Deputy Director of Emergency Management, Pat Santos presented to the class on the leadership challenges they have faced so far.

Landry was the Unified Area Commander of the Federal response to the spill until June 1 when she returned to her normal duty as Commander of District Eight and Commander of Task Force 189.8, headquartered in New Orleans, to prepare for hurricane season. Santos continues to be involved in Louisiana's response to the spill.



Supplementing their experiences were observations by NPLI faculty, Dr. Leonard Marcus and Dr. Barry Dorn, and NPLI Senior Editorial Associate Eric McNulty each of whom has visited the Gulf to observe the response leaders firsthand.

"We've noticed that control has been a major issue," said Marcus. "The public expects one person, Admiral Landry or Admiral Thad Allen or the President, to control everything. They simply do not and cannot in our system. One of the challenges for leaders in grasping the situation, Meta-Leadership Dimension Two, is to understand what they control and what they do not, and then focus their efforts on those elements they can control and that are most important to the response.

That is where they will have the biggest impact. It is as critical not to try to control factors that do not contribute to their overall mission. For a Cabinet Secretary, as an example, to fixate on the engineering challenges of capping the well—something he or she does not control and about which he or she has little expertise—would simply create an “anxiety gap,” distraction, and exacerbate the feeling of loss of control.”

Landry discussed leading across, Meta-Leadership Dimension Five, and the complexity of creating connectivity among all of those involved in the response. “This response is governed by the [National Contingency Plan](#) and, as it involves the water and coastline, the Coast Guard is in the lead under Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano as [principal Federal official](#),” Landry said. However, there are multiple Federal agencies with jurisdiction over components of the response—the National Response Team (NRT) includes 16 federal agencies from the Environmental Protection Agency that governs oil dispersants among other matters to the Department of Labor covering how many hours response workers can work to the Department of the Interior which is responsible for endangered species issues. It is also the first time that a National Incident Commander (NIC) has been appointed—something that while plain on paper, required adjustments when put into practice. The NIC’s job is to address the national implications of the incident, while the Unified Area Commander remains in charge of the immediate operational response—a distinction that is not always crystal clear, and where there may be some overlap in specific areas.



Layer onto this the agencies from four states as well as multiple local government entities—each of which adds to the jurisdictional complexity as there are legal requirements and limits to what each player can and cannot do. And each of which is seeking media attention and public sympathy as a way of advancing its case for

more resources for its particular needs.

“The New York Times has called the response ‘[chaotic](#),’” said McNulty. “For the unschooled, that is likely an accurate description. But if you talk to people like Pat (Santos) and Mary (Landry), they understand exactly what authority they have—

and what is reserved for others. They know the response plans inside and out. They fully grasp how this is supposed to work.” That doesn’t make their jobs any simpler or easier though as a good bit of the “chaos” exists because the laws and regulations that govern a response of this magnitude may overlap, be inconsistent, or be in tension when trying to prioritize what needs to be done in the response. All of this is amplified by the vexing challenge of stopping an oil leak 5,000 feet beneath the surface of the ocean—something that has never before been done. “There is an enormous ‘emergency literacy’ gap between the professionals and the media and lay public,” McNulty added.

Landry and Santos were able to demonstrate the importance of leading across by reconstructing the federal-state interface for the class to a degree. Their NPLI relationship, and that with fellow-NPLIer Dana Tulis of the EPA, made establishing interpersonal trust easy. However the larger relationship had issues as Governor Bobby Jindal sought to do what he saw as best for his state, as did each governor, while Landry and her Federal colleagues tried to coordinate a regional response that balanced environmental, economic, and political interests across all of the states.

“All of the existing plans stated that we would prioritize marshes and other environmentally sensitive areas over beaches and the states agreed to that, “Landry said. “But when tourists start cancelling reservations because they are afraid of oily beaches, the governors with beaches have second thoughts about those priorities.”

“Due to the sheer magnitude of the incident, centralized management through a single Incident Command Post proved to be difficult,” Santos said. “The decision to decentralize decision making authority by establishment of Forward Operating Branches (FOBs) in each affected parish improved the response. This is an example of leading across with federal, state, and local government working with the responsible party (BP).”

A distinctive feature—and leadership challenge—has been the duration of the spill. Those in emergency preparedness and response typically speak of activities as being



“pre-boom” or “post-boom” with “boom”—the event—generally a defined and short duration incident between them: a terrorist attack is over in seconds, an earthquake in minutes, and a hurricane in hours. In the case of this spill, the “boom” has been ongoing for more than two months and is forecast to continue at least until late August. It is happening concurrently with the response and continues to evolve, necessitating ongoing changes in the response.

“The extensive use of liaisons from the Coast Guard and BP assigned to local jurisdictions helped in establishing a flow of information providing critical situational awareness and an avenue for officials to vet issues,” Santos noted.

This simultaneous evolution has put leaders like Landry and Santos in a difficult position: their arms of government want cooperation from BP, the responsible party, because it has money, equipment, and expertise they need, while other parts of government such as Congress—and the public—are adversarial, openly vilifying the company and its executives. Leaders in the field must manage this tension—being tough enough with BP to satisfy one set of constituents while also maintaining a productive relationship with the company where it is required for an effective response. It is a quintessential Meta-leadership Dimension Four exercise in leading up made more intricate by the number of political factors to be weighed.

The slow unfolding of the event has enabled response leaders to think through their actions but also has given time to politicians to advocate for their particular agendas, critics to mount attacks, and finger pointers to assign blame before all of the facts are on the table. For leaders, each of these can be distractions from the overall response effort.



Finally, there is the question of transparency. A basic tenet of crisis communication for leaders is, “Tell the public what you know, what you don’t know, what you are doing to close the gap—and what it all means to them.” The continually shifting estimates of how much oil is being spewed, fluctuating from an initial [1,000 barrels a day](#) to up to [60,000 barrels a day](#)

later, fueled speculation in the media and ire among the public. Reporters complained of difficulty in [gaining access to some spill areas](#) and it took pressure

from Rep. Edward Markey (D-MA) to make a [BP-controlled live video feed](#) of the leak public. A tension developed between openness desired by the public and the apparent inclination of BP to control information, in part because they are a public company and there are strict restrictions on disclosure of financial information that might affect stock price.

Leaders must manage expectations of the public and enforce standards of transparency that meet those expectations. Where there are legitimate reasons for withholding information, they must be explained; where obfuscation by one party is suspected, pressure must be applied. The government, BP, and the general public are all in virgin territory with regard to this incident and leaders must realize that it is the latter who will ultimately judge the success or failure of the response.

Dorn commented, "Both of these individuals has been a case study in Meta-Leadership Dimension One, demonstrating emotional intelligence and self-awareness in trying circumstances. They are a credit to the NPLI."

The NPLI will publish a case history of the meta-leadership lessons from this event in Summer 2010.