

***LeaderPerfect Newsletter***  
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**Leadership In Crisis:  
No Time For Learning On the Job**

**by Dr. Mike Armour**

Making his way home from church that Sunday, Joseph Metcalf had no idea that his world was about to change dramatically.

The first inkling that something was afoot came as his car turned into the naval base at Norfolk. Approaching the gate, he anticipated the normal routine. The sentry would recognize him, snap to attention, and render a crisp military salute, signaling him to proceed.

But not today. Instead the sentry stopped the vehicle and stepped to the window. "Admiral Metcalf," the young man said, "CINCLANT wants to see you at his headquarters immediately." A certain urgency punctuated his words.

**A Flash Bulb In The Face**

CINCLANT (pronounced "SINK-LANT") was an acronym for Commander-in-Chief, Atlantic. A four-star admiral, he directed all military operations in the Atlantic region. He was also Vice-Admiral Metcalf's immediate superior.

Metcalf hurried to the CINCLANT compound and went straight to meet his boss. The reason for his summons was quickly made clear. "The White House has decided to invade Grenada within 72 hours," CINCLANT began, "and you're in charge."

The announcement came as a complete surprise. Metcalf later compared it to a flash bulb going off in your face as you enter a darkened room.

But within minutes he was assembling his command team and starting to develop a war plan. Operation Urgent Fury, it would be called. And three days later American forces stormed ashore on a tiny Caribbean island where hundreds of Americans were in peril.

Some time afterward, following his retirement, I was in the audience one day when Admiral Metcalf addressed a conference for senior intelligence officers at the Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington. By then history was rendering an unkind verdict on tactical execution during Operation Urgent Fury. Intelligence had been faulty, topographical maps outdated. And worst of all, Army, Navy, and Marine communication systems had been unable to speak to each other.

## No Learning In Crisis

Admiral Metcalf was invited to brief us on all the obstacles he faced and how Operation Urgent Fury improvised to get around them. During a follow-on question and answer period someone asked, "Admiral, how do you get ready to run a war in 72 hours?"

Without a moment's hesitation, Metcalf shot back, "I didn't get ready to run a war in 72 hours. I had been getting ready for 27 years."

I'll never forget that response. Others, faced with his 72-hour deadline, might have obsessed on how little time they had to prepare. Not Metcalf. From his perspective he had been given nearly 30 years to prepare. To him 72 hours merely represented three days to tap into all that he had learned during decades of "getting ready."

As Admiral Metcalf was making his point, my mind went to a peculiarity of our language. We talk about "learning *from* crisis." But we never talk about "learning *in* crisis." During crisis our goal is not learning, but coping. There's precious little time to "learn new tricks." When crisis strikes, we rely on what's already habitual. On what has become instinctual through years of practice.

Later there may be a time to look back, to reflect unhurriedly on the crisis, to absorb its major lessons. But not now. Not while the crisis is in full force. In crisis all we can do is fight back with resources and skill sets already in place.

## Preparatory Learning

Unfortunately, crisis rarely gives us much warning. It likes to spring on us, catching us unaware. Pouncing on us. Blind-siding us. Shoving us into a room where a flash bulb goes off in our face. And that's when our true "stuff" shows itself. As someone said long ago, crisis does not create character so much as it reveals it.

For leaders, the flash bulb going off means it's showtime. The time to "get ready" is now a thing of the past. That's why I constantly encourage those I coach to be stretching themselves. Deepening their skills. Broadening their knowledge. Strengthening their sense of self. Preparing now for that unknown future that will test their leadership mettle in some extraordinary moment.

Preparatory learning may call on you to master critical skills, like how to communicate. How to motivate. How to inspire. How to build trust.

Equally important is mastery of self. Learning to manage your own inner bearing. Learning to hold personal anxiety in check. Learning to stay riveted on the most critical issues, whatever the distraction. Learning to remain calm when others are verging on panic. Learning to believe in yourself, so that you do not falter — even for a moment — when the time comes to lead out.

## The Great Storm

Crisis has a way of thrusting itself upon us, ready or not. One of my college professors, Gene Shuford, captured the certainty of crisis in a prize-winning poem written as a tribute to Ernest Hemingway. Near the end of the work stands this somber stanza:

The tall pine looms out of the forest  
To draw the lightning first when the great storm comes.  
But like he said,  
The forest fire gets around to all of us in due season.  
Just stick around, baby. Just stick around.

What you're doing today is preparing you, concretely, for some future storm. For some future forest fire. For some moment that will demand everything you have to offer.

None of us knows when that moment will come. Or what it will look like when it does. But in that moment, those who look to you for leadership will expect you to be prepared. Thoroughly.

So learn well today in order to lead well tomorrow.

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