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A Theory of Culture-Switching: Leadership and Red Tape during Hurricane Katrina

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Abstract

This paper draws upon studies of organizational culture and sensemaking to develop a theory of culture-switching. Culture-switching occurs when organizational actors shift emphasis from one existing organizational cultural assumption to another to reshape organizational action. The concept is demonstrated in a case-study of the Hurricane Katrina response by the US Department of Defense (DOD). A slow initial DOD response arose because of self-imposed red-tape designed to limit engagement in crisis response, reflecting a cultural assumption of the need to maintain autonomy. DOD leaders altered the nature of the response by committing to another widely-shared cultural assumption: a “can-do” approach to achieving difficult goals regardless of obstacles. The case illustrates how different organizational cultural assumptions interact with red tape to foster either inertia or a proactive response.

After Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc across the US Gulf Coast in 2005, federal agencies were criticized for inertia and red tape. One Congressional review of the disaster was titled “A Failure of Initiative” (House Report, 2006). The White House (2006, p.70) review stated: “Most important, we must eliminate the extraordinary red tape and resulting delays in the process of requests for assistance in response efforts.”

For the largest federal agency actually involved in the response, the US Department of Defense (DOD), the story was more complicated. Early in the response, the DOD caused a good deal of the delay by imposing rules that required detailed vetting of requests for aid. But in the latter part of the response the DOD was responsive, cutting through red tape. How was such a large organization able to alter the nature of its response in such a short space of time? This article argues that DOD leaders engaged in “culture-switching”, that is, they departed from an organizational response that reflected one pre-existing cultural assumption by committing clearly to a different cultural assumption.

The next section outlines the theoretical framework that underpins the concept of culture-switching. While the concept has been inductively developed from the Katrina case study that follows, it draws strongly from studies of organizational culture and sensemaking. To provide a theoretical setting to apply the concept of culture-switching, the article next examines a previously established hypothesis about the relationship between culture and organizational effectiveness. This hypothesis proposes that certain organizational cultures can limit the negative impact of excessive zeal for rules (red tape) on organizational effectiveness. The ability to switch between cultural assumptions should therefore impact red tape, and in turn, organizational performance.

After a discussion of data and methods, the article uses the Katrina case as an empirical setting to examine how the concept of culture-switching can expand our understanding of the red tape-culture hypothesis. The case describes how the self-imposed rules that led to the slow initial DOD response reflected a basic cultural assumption of the need to maintain autonomy by avoiding non-traditional tasks and interagency coordination. As DOD leadership realized the full extent of Katrina, they encouraged staff not to let rules constrain them. DOD leaders did not manufacture a new organizational culture on demand. But a process of sensemaking allowed them to understand their organization's basic cultural assumptions and when such assumptions are appropriate. These leaders altered the nature of DOD response by committing to another cultural attribute of the organization: a "can-do" desire to achieve difficult goals regardless of obstacles. Communicating the culture-switch allowed followers to understand how to act in a turbulent and confusing environment.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of culture-switching is centered on three basic assumptions that draw a good deal from Schein's (1992) framework for organizational culture, and Weick's (1995, 2001) concept of sensemaking. First, organizations have multiple cultural attributes (labeled basic assumptions) that co-exist with each other. Second, leaders can call forth this attributes depending on the challenges the organization faces, a tactic labeled culture-switching. Third, culture switching is not easy, and requires leadership sensemaking and commitment.

Multiple Basic Cultural Assumptions

Schein (1992, p.12) defines organizational culture as: “A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaption and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceived, think, and feel in relation to those problems.” The basic assumptions Schein refers to are the most fundamental aspects of culture, reflecting deeply embedded beliefs about how the organization is supposed to function. Such assumptions represent the ultimate source of organizational values and actions, have been validated over time, come to be treated as a given reality, and are difficult to change. While difficult to directly observe, the impact of these assumptions can be inferred by examining two more superficial levels of culture. Espoused values represent explicit strategies, goals and philosophies. Artifacts are the most observable level of culture, represented in overt language, symbols, processes, structures, and behavior (Schein 1992).

Organizations require a mix of basic cultural assumptions to deal with such essential issues of member’s sense of identity, how control is utilized, and tolerance for risk and conflict (see Hofstede et al. 1990 for a detailed treatment of these dimensions). One dimension of basic assumptions is where the organization fits in terms of means-end orientation, i.e., the extent to which it prioritizes outcomes rather than process (Hofstede et al. 1990). Another key dimension is how an organization defines itself in reference to its outside environment (Schein 1992). The case analysis will show that basic assumptions on these two dimensions are essential in understanding the DOD response to Katrina.

The Possibility of Culture-Switching

The different basic assumptions of an organization might appear to contradict one another. In the case of the DOD we will see, on the one hand, how a preference for autonomy from the external environment led the organization to create procedural barriers that stymied coordination. On the other hand, the DOD has a strong mission-orientation. Once it sets to a task, it may set aside rules that limit goal-achievement. How to explain this apparent conflict about the utility of rules? The concept of culture-switching recognizes that multiple and apparently conflicting cultural attributes can coexist in relative harmony, and enjoy wide organizational support, but that organizational leaders can emphasize different assumptions at different times to allow the organization to better meet its challenges.

In the case of the DOD, the apparent conflict between the different assumptions is rarely relevant because the preference for autonomy dominates. The DOD commits to working with other organizations reluctantly, and sets the terms of these relationships via onerous procedures. But in the case of Hurricane Katrina, this approach proved too slow, and had to be abandoned amidst the crisis. DOD leadership engaged in culture-switching with a functional purpose, calling on a basic assumption that clarified to military actors that aiding in the response to Katrina was an appropriate goal that they should wholeheartedly pursue.

To be clear, culture-switching is not the same thing as culture change. Much of the popular literature on organizational culture rests upon the fallacious impression that culture is a malleable tool subject to the will of all-powerful leaders (Khademian, 2002). But an essential characteristic of basic cultural assumptions is that they are deeply embedded and difficult to change. Actual culture change in mature organizations is a long-term task requiring that organizational actors unfreeze prior beliefs, and then find and refreeze a new set of assumptions (Schein 1992). Culture-switching does not demand such a deep cognitive adaptation, and can occur in a

compressed time period. To work, culture-switching depends upon, rather than seeks to alter, basic assumptions that are familiar to organizational actors.

The Need for Sensemaking and Commitment among Leaders

Even if culture-switching is easier than cultural change, it is still difficult, requiring an ability to recognize what cultural attributes exist within an organization, and when each cultural assumption is appropriate. A basic requirement, therefore, is what Weick (1995; 2001) calls sensemaking. Sensemaking requires organizational actors to recognize and find appropriate responses to new challenges. The need for sensemaking is most pressing in crisis conditions where organizational actors face incongruous and unexpected events that disrupt and render irrelevant normal ways of working (Weick 1995, p.100). In times of crisis and uncertainty followers need direction, a new synthesis that resolves ambiguities about goals, the nature of the problem, and what values to pursue.

The central question for sensemaking theory is how meanings and artifacts are produced and reproduced in complex nets of collective action (Weick, 1995, p.172). A first step of sensemaking is developing an accepted interpretation of external events: “Once an interpretation is stabilized, then people can design for decision making...In order to construct such a framework people have to encode events into a common set of values and implications. Once that commonality is achieved, then they can begin to act like professionals” (Weick 2001, pp.72-3).

Sensemaking is difficult for large numbers of people to do, and so organizational leaders play a crucial role: “(S)trategic-level managers formulate the organization’s interpretation. When one speaks of organizational interpretation one really means interpretation by a relatively

small group at the top of the organizational hierarchy” (Weick 2001, p.243; the importance of leaders in transmitting culture during critical incidents is also noted by Schein 1992, p.237).

As leaders assert an accepted interpretation and synthesis they frame not just the nature of the challenge the organization faces, but also a set of shared values needed to respond to that challenge. The credibility of leadership commitment depends upon whether it rests upon socially acceptable notions among followers (Weick 2001, 18). If justifications depart from basic cultural assumptions, the course of action a leader promotes recommended is less likely to be accepted, and more likely to be resisted, either passively or actively. But not all cultural assumptions will be equally suited to supporting the new synthesis, and leaders may emphasize some over others.

Culture-switching also requires that leaders are capable not just of synthesizing, but also of articulating this synthesis. This is the communication aspect of culture-switching, and Weick (2001) refers to this as committed interpretation. As leaders publicly commit to a particular goal, strategy, or set of values, they provide clarity to followers, creating a shared interpretation that limits the range of acceptable options for dealing with a problem. Shared cultural assumptions aid in communication and comprehension in times of turbulence, providing a frame by which complex situations become understandable (Trice and Beyer 1993). Cultural norms also provide guidance for how discretion is to be exercised. In non-routine situations, such as the response to disasters like Katrina, authority must be delegated and leaders can no longer control via formal processes (Weick 1995, p.114). In such a context, cultural assumptions provide the best means of directing behavior.

Theoretical Application: The Interaction of Culture and Red Tape

To demonstrate the theoretical utility of the concept of culture-switching it is applied to a pre-existing hypothesis on how organizational culture interacts with red tape to affect performance. The goal is to show how culture-switching extends the understanding of this hypothesis.

Two assumptions in public management scholarship are that red tape reduces performance (Bozeman, 2000), and that certain forms of organizational culture can enhance effectiveness (Rainey and Steinbauer 1999). The interactive effect of these two variables on management outcomes has recently begun to be examined (Brewer and Walker 2010; Pandey and Moynihan, 2006; Pandey, Coursey and Moynihan, 2007; Walker and Brewer, 2009).

Ban's (1995) case-studies of US federal agencies found that some were more successful than others at mitigating rule constraints because of their organizational culture. A survey of US public health organizations formalized and tested the implications of Ban's insight (Pandey and Moynihan 2006; Pandey, Coursey and Moynihan 2007). This research found that the interaction between measures of organizational red tape and developmental culture (characterized by dynamism and innovation) were positively and significantly related to employee perceptions of performance. In another study, Walker and Brewer (2009) offer similar results, finding that British local government organizations with a prospective strategic stance were better able to mitigate the negative effects of red tape on both stakeholder and employee assessments of performance. Pandey, Coursey and Moynihan (2007, p.416) summarized the relevance of these findings: "(T)wo organizations with the same level of red tape might see their effectiveness suffer, but the organization with a culture more attuned to coping with and working around red tape is likely to experience smaller performance declines. The implication is that in public organizations in which the reduction of red tape is often, at best, difficult to achieve, fostering

cultures that promote adaptive responses to red tape may mitigate the negative aspects of burdensome rules and procedures.”

This research, while insightful, depends upon a cross-sectional design and quantitative data which confers some limitations. First, the cross-sectional approach by its very nature cannot consider the shifting nature of culture within the same organization across time. Second, this work treats culture as a uni-dimensional concept and a function of individual perspectives. Such an approach neglects organization-specific cultural attributes and the multi-dimensionality of organizational cultures. Both scholars of sensemaking and organizational culture speak to the need of grounding research in the empirical context of the organization, utilizing organization-specific cultural assumptions rather than externally-imposed concepts, and focusing on collective beliefs rather than individual perspectives (Schein 1992, p.147; Weick 1995, pp.172-3).

The modeling choices of previous work on red tape and culture excludes the possibility of studying culture-switching. By contrast, this article explicitly seeks to consider both the temporal and multi-dimensional aspects of culture, identifying culture in terms of particular cultural assumptions specific to the organization. Unlike prior quantitative work, the case can therefore demonstrate a) how, within the same organization, different cultural assumptions can be dominant at one point, and not at others, b) how varying cultural assumptions affect how the same organization deals with constraints, and c) how leaders call upon different assumptions at different points, and d) how culture-switching alters how the interaction between culture and red tape matters to organizational performance in a relatively short space of time. The next section lays out in greater detail the nature of basic cultural assumptions for the organization studied.

Basic Cultural Assumptions in the DOD

The abstract nature of organizational culture makes causal claims about its importance easy to make and hard to disprove. If we see an outcome, we can easily assign blame or praise to some loosely-defined cultural concept. In popular discourse “bureaucratic culture” is used to explain instances of government waste, intrusiveness, turf-protection, incompetence, and red tape, among other maladies. In the case of Katrina, the White House (2006) argued that it illustrated the absence of a “culture of preparedness.” Such claims tend to be simplistic, relying on a retrospective assignment of causality that selectively reclassifies the organizational culture to mirror the problem. To avoid such problems this article utilizes two basic DOD cultural assumptions that feature repeatedly in military scholarship set in the empirical context of the DOD. The two assumptions examined do not provide a comprehensive account of DOD culture, but are the most relevant in explaining its response to Hurricane Katrina.

The Autonomy Assumption

In his classic analysis of civil-military relations, Huntington (1957) argued that a widely shared belief within the DOD was on the need for a measure of autonomy. Huntington describes a military where officers believed that a clear separation with civilian life was necessary, partly to maintain an ethic of professionalism that engendered obedience to a civilian command, but also to maintain the perceived moral superiority of military life.

The desire for autonomy reveals itself in two ways that are relevant to crisis response: a reluctance to coordinate with others, and a preference for avoiding non-core missions. A suspicion of interagency cooperation characterizes the history of the Department. Within the DOD itself, distinct service cultures and interbranch rivalries have restricted coordination (Builder 1989). This preference for autonomy has become more problematic as the DOD has

been tasked with non-military missions that require collaboration with outside actors, such as fighting terrorism, diplomacy, nation building, the war on drugs, peacekeeping, and crisis response (Priest, 2003). The DOD has often resisted such missions, sometimes passively, sometimes openly. The reluctance to engage in such activities is so deeply embedded in DOD culture that they have their own name: Military Operations Other than War (MOOTW). One former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was known to mock the Pentagon's "great angst" about mission creep by frequently stating that "Real men don't do MOOTW" (Priest 2003, p.56). Advocates for MOOTW face a hostile DOD culture: "In the macho world of the military, it wasn't difficult to see who would lose this doctrinal fight: obviously the guy who's only talking about things 'other than war.' Who, after all, joins the military to do things other than war? I mean, isn't that called the Peace Corps?" (Barnett 2004, p.193).

Military scholars help us to understand why the DOD desire for autonomy is so pronounced. Dunivin (1994, 533) points out that "the military's core activity, which defines its very existence and meaning, is combat." By moving the DOD away from combat and in closer collaboration with civilian agencies, MOOTW is viewed as an existential threat, reducing the separation from the rest of society. Former officers have argued that MOOTW make the DOD less capable of achieving its core mission, while dangerously intruding into the domestic political realm (Dunlap 1996). Hillen (1999, 158) summarizes these concerns: "Using the military to correct the failings of other institutions would cause military culture to atrophy, denying politicians the very instrument they hoped to use for domestic tasks."

To limit the impacts of MOOTW the DOD has used red tape to engage in "bureaucratic foot-dragging and 'slow rolling' so that the undesired policy will never be implemented" (Feaver 2003, p.68). This tension between the autonomy assumption and the need for the DOD to

coordinate with others leads Barnett (2004, p.372) to warn that “‘interagency’ cooperation between federal departments has superseded ‘jointness,’ or cooperation among military services, as the key management challenge in national security in coming years.”

The basic assumption about the need to avoid MOOTW and civilian coordination in the area of crisis response is reflected in cultural artifacts (specifically rules and procedures) and espoused values in military doctrine. The crisis response doctrine of the DOD specifies that it will become involved “only when other local, state or Federal resources are unavailable and only if Defense support does not interfere with DOD’s primary mission or ability to respond to operational contingencies” (DISCINT 2005, p. IV-3). National crisis response policy assigns various crisis roles to federal agencies, and assumes that these agencies will be coordinated by a unified command. Despite being delegated more responsibilities than any other federal department, the DOD interprets the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 to mean that it cannot be placed under any civilian-led unified command (DISCINT, 2005, IV-7).

Within these constraints, the DOD offers two forms of crisis response capacity. First, when necessary, the DOD is willing to provide help to civilian authorities, but views mission assignments from these agencies as requests for assistance rather than orders from a command. The DOD facilitates this coordination by placing a Defense Coordinating Officer to work with the Federal Coordinating Officer at the Joint Field Office of the incident. The Defense Coordinating Officer is the on-site commander of DOD resources unless a separate command is established. Second, if serious enough, the military may decide to establish a separate command to direct its own forces. In Katrina, this took the form of Joint Task Force Katrina, led by General Russel L. Honoré.

A further constraint on DOD crisis response is a set of self-imposed rules. The process for reviewing requests for assistance is established by 1997 DOD Directive 3025.15. Requests are supposed to go from the Federal Coordinating Officer to the Defense Coordinating Officer, who then passes them through the Northern Command (NORTHCOM – the part of the DOD whose theater of operations includes the United States) to the Office of the Secretary of Defense Executive Secretariat, and then to the Joint Director of Military Support (JDOMS). The validity and legality of the request is reviewed at each stage, and the request is expected to estimate the length of time support will be needed. JDOMS is required to consider the impact on the DODs budget, whether it is in DOD’s interest to participate, the legality of action, possible harm to civilians, and effect on readiness for overseas mission. The recommendation of JDOMS is normally passed to the Joint Chiefs and requires Presidential approval, but in times of disaster or if local authorities need immediate help, the DOD can move more quickly.

JDOMS provides a buffering mechanism that ensures that the DOD does not undertake unsuitable missions or engage in unnecessary interagency action. But JDOMS procedures also make it more difficult for the civilian agencies formally mandated to lead crisis response to know when, in what manner, and to what extent, the DOD will offer its help.

The “Can-do” Assumption

The second basic DOD cultural assumption relevant to understanding the response to Katrina is a “can-do” desire to get the job done. This “can-do” assumption is rooted in the DOD’s perception of itself as obedient to civilian control. Feaver (2003, p.80), notes that a norm of obedience has been widely observed in research on US civil-military relations, sometimes described as “professionalism,” “cult of obedience,” or “norm of civilian control.”

In the military world, obedience is characterized by the aggressive pursuit of organizational goals. This “can-do” ethos “emphasized overcoming obstacles to accomplish any mission” (West 2008, p.83). “From a career officer's perspective, when given a mission to achieve, no officer wants to be the one to say ‘We can't do this.’ Such actions, even when rarely taken, could affect one's own performance appraisals, reputation as a team player, and subsequent prospects for promotion” (Romzek and Ingraham 2000, p.250). The “can-do” ethos can lead military officials to view rules as red tape that must be ignored in the name of mission-achievement (Romzek and Ingraham 2000, p.243).

A former US ambassador to war-torn Yugoslavia summarized the tensions between autonomy and obedience. “The Pentagon’s tactic was never to say no, as that would undercut its “can-do” approach. Rather it simply raised objections that would make the proposals unworkable” (Feaver 2003, pp.262-3). But once the DOD accepts a task, even reluctantly, it will pursue it to the best of its ability. Priest (2003, p.45) suggests that this basic assumption has enabled the DOD to undertake non-traditional tasks amid budget cuts: “They detested some of the new responsibilities, but once tasked, men and women in uniforms did what they were assigned.”

Data and Method

Case Selection and Purpose of Case

This case study utilized in this article fulfills two purposes. First, the case was essential in developing the theory of culture-switching. The author selected the case study because of the puzzle of how the DOD, unlike other responders, was able to significantly adjust its response amidst Katrina. In studying the case, the relevance of the interaction between red tape and

culture became clear, but so too did the more novel concept of culture-switching. Where there is limited research on a topic, case studies and an inductive approach are especially useful in generating new hypotheses by examining how complex causal pathways actually occur (Agranoff and Radin 1991, 221; Brower et al. 2000, 367; George and Bennett 2004; Siggelkow 2007, 21-22).

While the unusual nature of the case limits generalizability, the case also offers a compelling methodological advantage. The case provides a natural experiment in understanding how the key variables interact, showing how an external shock (Hurricane Katrina) affected an organization in a relatively short period and in clearly observable ways. This reduces the risk that the causal pathways described are the result of some unobserved variable. Katrina was clearly the event causing organizational leaders to seek to switch between cultural modes, and the case narrative details how they did so. The value of representativeness, in this context, is less important than the theoretical value of a case “particularly suitable for illuminating and extending relationships and logic among constructs” (Eisenhardt and Grabner 2007, p.27).

The second purpose of the case study is to illustrate theory. New concepts and interaction effects can be intuitively easier to understand when grounded in a setting which offers a detailed narration demonstrating the variables and how they interact (Siggelkow 2007).

The previous section identifies that the article draws upon Schein’s model of culture, treating basic assumptions as the key aspects of culture to be studied. Given that these assumptions are the most difficult aspects of culture to observe, the article utilizes previously identified DOD cultural assumptions featured in military scholarship (detailed in the previous section). In order to observe the culture-shift, the case links these assumptions to artifacts and espoused values, and in turn, to organizational action. The case narrative identifies the point at which DOD leadership

altered course by utilizing artifacts and espoused values that signaled a switch from the autonomy assumption to the “can-do” assumption.

Data Coding

To assemble the case the author performed a systematic analysis of qualitative data from relevant public reports about Katrina from the White House (2006), a specially-formed House committee (House Report 2006), the Senate Committee of Homeland Security and Government Affairs (Senate Report 2006), transcripts from hearings before the House and Senate committees, and supplemented these documents with information from investigative reports (primarily Cooper and Block 2006). One potential weakness of this approach is a reliance on secondary data sources. The conclusions of the article depend upon the information included in those analyses. However, in this case the public documents are descriptively rich, provide the most detailed accounts of the incident, and draw on resources – including hundreds of interviews and documents not publicly available – that few research teams could match.

These reports and transcripts were analyzed using qualitative software (QSR N6) that allows for systematic coding of relevant variables. While use of such software remains rare in public administration research, qualitative methodologists associate it with a more systematic approach to data analysis (Brower and Jeong 2008, p.834). Reports and testimony were imported into the software package as text documents. As the author read chunks of text, they were allocated to one or more of dozens of possible self-created thematic codes. A total of 1,765 pages were coded to understand the response to Katrina. The average text page included over 24 text units, meaning that the average text unit coded by the author was approximately 2-3 sentences.

The initial codes created were consistent with Strauss and Corbin's (1998) recommendation for axial coding, with codes representing basic aspects of organizational life and crisis response, e.g. codes on culture, coordination, and leadership. These codes were modified and sub-codes created as themes emerge inductively from the content analysis. The interpretation of the code was recorded and modified in accompanying memos (Miles and Huberman 1994, 58-62).

Ultimately, the author drew from a number of specific codes to analyze the variables described in this case: "inertia", "discretion", "chain of command/unclear authority", "logistics", "culture", "SOPs", "overwhelmed/sensemaking", "coordination", "learning", and "leadership"

The process of coding pushes the researcher to develop a potential theory in a way that simply reading the text does not, with the relevance, meaning, and interconnection between concepts is shaped by the data (Miles and Huberman 1994). The culture-switching concept was developed and modified consistent with the approach described by Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007, 25): "The theory-building process occurs via recursive cycling among the case data, emerging theory, and later, extant literature."

Content analysis using computer software offers some advantages over a less structured approach (Miles and Huberman 1994). First, it is the only manageable way to organize large amounts of qualitative data (Brower and Jeong, 2008, p.833). Second, it challenges the researcher to be systematic in identifying the presence and nature of a concept. Third, it provides some check on the reliability of the data, with transparency, rather than replication, as the goal. Without a purely deductive approach and relatively simple coding instrument, the process of interpreting and developing complex and interactive concepts as they are represented in detailed texts contexts does not lend itself to replication (Richards 2002). But computer coding does provide a documentary record of the researcher's definitions of codes, judgments about how to

code text, and interpretations of those codes in memos. These tools provide an audit trail and a level of transparency that allows other researchers to revisit the process of analysis in a similar fashion that quantitative data sets can be examined and subject to alternative interpretations (Bringer, Brackenridge, and Johnston 2006). A copy of the content analysis is available from the author upon request.

In structuring case evidence, this article follows the advice of Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007), presenting evidence in distinct sections that inform different theoretical propositions. The following section explains the relevance of DOD cultural assumptions during the Katrina response.

The DOD during Katrina

In the aftermath of Katrina, the DOD was both praised for its responsiveness and criticized for its inertia. Both characterizations are accurate in that they reflect two distinct time periods. In the first period, before and immediately after landfall, the DOD took an essentially reactive posture, waiting for requests from civilian authorities. In the second period, a day after landfall, the DOD took a much more proactive stance.

Period One: The Moment of Inertia

Federal Emergency Management Agencies (FEMA) officials who led the civilian response to Katrina characterized the initial DOD response as “cumbersome” and Louisiana state officials described it as “slow and overly bureaucratic” (House Report 2006, p.205). FEMA staff cited examples where the DOD could have been more responsive. It took 24 hours for the DOD to process orders for helicopters to survey the damage. FEMA requested eight specialist rescue

teams and equipment from Air Force bases in California. While FEMA liaisons worked all night drawing up the request, they were told in the morning that Secretary Rumsfeld was unavailable to approve it (Rumsfeld was in San Diego, his schedule including a baseball game). At one point, when told when Pentagon rules did not allow for the quick procurement of a boat to house the homeless, FEMA Director Michael Brown asked: “Why isn’t red tape being cut?” (Cooper and Block 2006, p.226).

State government officials encountered similar inertia (House Report 2006, pp.204-5). Andy Kopplin, Chief of Staff to Louisiana Governor Blanco, requested that the DOD deploy four helicopters that were at the Fort Polk Air Force Base in Louisiana. On the day after landfall, Kopplin called the base itself, and was told that the Governor needed to make a formal request to the DOD to release the helicopters. After spending hours on the phone to an official at the Pentagon, permission was given. But then the helicopters were not released until the next day. Because pilots had spent the day idling on the tarmac awaiting orders, they had exceeded their allowed flight time for the day and were not allowed to fly (Cooper and Block 2006, p.173).

Much of the delays resulted from the JDOMS process described above. Scott Wells, a FEMA Federal Coordinating Officer and former military officer, testified to the Senate that JDOMS is “more than awkward. It’s more than cumbersome. It just takes a long time to execute.” The DOD argued that most delays in processing requests for aid were because of vague FEMA requests (Senate Report 2006, p.26-48). From the perspective of FEMA officials working under difficult conditions, the DOD demanded an excessive level of detail unlikely to be satisfied in the chaos of Katrina. Wells suggested that the DOD could have been more involved during earlier stages of the response, but that they wished “to know 80 to 90 percent of the information before they will

commit an asset” (Senate 2006, p.26-20). Once the DOD reviewed a request, it often returned it to FEMA seeking additional clarification.

In describing the cultural reasons behind DOD resistance, investigators pointed to the autonomy assumption, noting that many responders complained about: “‘a cultural reluctance’ to commit Department assets to civil support missions unless absolutely necessary” (Senate Report, 2006, p.26-19). In Congressional testimony, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense Paul McHale suggested that having non-DOD officials in charge of military forces was “a bad idea,” telling the Senate that “You can decide whether or not it would have been a good idea for Secretary [sic] [Michael] Brown to have command authority over General Honoré’s forces in New Orleans.”

Even DOD officials on the front lines shared the frustration of other crisis responders. Captain Michael McDaniel, the Navy liaison to FEMA, said: “JDOMS is notorious or has been notorious, ‘Well, you can’t ask for it that way. You need to do it like this.’ Well, tell me how I need to ask for it, you know? I just need some helicopter support down there” (Senate Report 2006, p.26-20). Colonel Don Harrington, another military liaison to FEMA agreed that “yes, there were some delays over there for 9,153 different reasons, and that created some angst...I think it’s just a cultural thing, all the way up...Just a cultural reluctance that they want to make sure that mission analysis is done and all the options are explored before you come to DOD” (Senate Report 2006, p.26-20). General Honoré had also urged a more proactive approach. The evening before Katrina made landfall he contacted NORTHCOM, asking for details on assets that could be deployed, and sought a response by 2 a.m. the next morning. However, JDOMS did not want to see any internal military initiatives that were unrelated to FEMA requests. This delayed the ability of the DOD to become an active participant in the response. In an email to

Honoré 12 hours *after* landfall, the Operations Director at NORTHCOM, explained the delay in providing the information on deployable assets as due to being “somewhat hamstrung by JDOMS desire to wait for [Requests for Assistance]” (Senate Report 2006, p.26-16).

That DOD officials blamed FEMA for failing to prepare adequate requests for assistance indicates that the DOD began by treating Katrina as a disaster like any other, even as there was significant warning that it was not. It relied on a reactive approach, using JDOMS to ensure that any proposed participation be carefully vetted before it was approved. The White House (2006, p.54) report counted 21 steps needed in this approval process and argued that this “overly bureaucratic approach... resulted in critical needs not being met.” By waiting for specific requests to come from the bottom-up, the DOD introduced a measure of delay in the process. A more proactive approach would have seen the DOD move rapidly to deploy resources without formal requests, and to establish a separate command. The model for such a proactive stance is provided by the DOD itself, in the days following landfall. This phase of Katrina illustrated that the DOD could set aside its self-imposed constraints when it determined that such rules limited goal achievement. But before the DOD could do so, leadership had to draw from a different set of cultural assumptions about what an appropriate response looked like.

The Culture-Switching Moment

On the Tuesday after landfall, the DOD leadership found a different gear. The sense of urgency that emerged was partly a reaction to a better understanding of the event. Like other federal officials not in Louisiana, DOD leadership assumed that New Orleans had “dodged a bullet” as late as Monday night. DOD leaders were also under political pressure from President Bush. An email from a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Admiral Timothy Keating,

Commander of NORTHCOM read: “Whatever you can think of and get it moving yesterday...Overkill is better than undershoot. POTUS [President of the US] is coming back to D.C. tonight just for this” (Senate Report 2006, p.26-23).

On Tuesday morning Assistant Secretary McHale, Deputy Secretary Gordon England (who was acting Secretary in Rumsfeld’s absence), and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers, met. McHale reported that they were concerned that media reports were underreporting damage, and that FEMA was not making requests in a timely fashion. Up to now these leaders had done nothing to adjust the cumbersome JDOMS procedure, maintaining a reactive approach.

As described above, an essential aspect of sensemaking is the ability to comprehend and synthesize confusing events, while recognizing how organizational constraints and resources can be reassembled in a way consistent with new understandings. This requires leaders to have detailed organizational knowledge. It is of little use in offering broad demands for responsiveness – for example, FEMA Director Michael Brown frequently urged responders to “push the envelope” – without a detailed understanding of how organizational standard operating procedures will limit or further responsiveness. On Tuesday morning DOD leaders recognized that a) this was no ordinary crisis, b) prompt action by the DOD was necessary, and c) they could not rely on standard processes for incorporating the DOD response if they were to be effective. It was only after this synthesis was established that the full resources of the DOD were put in place. But all three aspects of sensemaking were needed – if DOD leaders understood only a) and b), but failed to recognize c), it is doubtful that they would have been capable of overcoming organizational inertia.

That such a synthesis would emerge is not as obvious as it might appear in retrospect. The DOD leadership broke new ground by requiring that the DOD temporarily abandon the formalistic nature of JDOMS procedures, depart their traditional reluctance to engage in MOOTW, and wholeheartedly pursue the non-core mission of crisis response.

Not only did DOD officials develop this synthesis, they also had to communicate it.

Deputy Secretary England told the Joint Chiefs of Staff and representatives of the military services that they should “lean forward” and that NORTHCOM was to be provided with any asset it needed. On Tuesday afternoon, General Myers repeated these commitments to his service chiefs, adding that they could proceed on the authority of vocal command, from himself or from Deputy Secretary England, to provide resources to Admiral Keating. Keating was told by England that he had a “blank check” to respond. A later order provided further autonomy to DOD responders, expanding Myers vocal order to allow commanders to react anywhere they saw a need.

With these decisions, DOD leaders committed to a more proactive approach, rather than wait for the JDOMS process to facilitate military engagement. Nothing made this clearer than the highly unusual decision to rely on vocal command. In almost all cases, deployments for resources follow written orders which are electronically tracked. Assistant Secretary McHale recalled: “The message from the Deputy Secretary of Defense, consistent with the counsel provided by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, was to act with a sense of urgency and to minimize paperwork and bureaucracy to the greatest extent possible.” Admiral Keating understood the direction as, “We're moving anything we think FEMA will need. No obstacles from DOD or Joint” (Senate Report 2006, p.26-24). The shift to vocal command represented a realization that paperwork that in normal times was necessary to verify the order and legality of

military action had effectively become a form of red tape. The DOD would now take action consistent with the needs of the situation, and catch up with the paperwork later.

Such visible communication was necessary because organizational turbulence creates ambiguities for members (Weick 2001). Up to this point DOD staff – even those who saw the need for an active response, such as Honoré - remained constrained by JDOMS procedures. DOD actors needed to be told that the existing approach had to be changed, and that resistance to accepting this mission was not acceptable. The use of language such as “blank check” and “lean forward”, the delegation of authority to lower-level commanders, and the use of vocal command represented highly visible cultural artifacts that communicated a significant shift away from the autonomy assumption and toward the “can-do” assumption. The very public commitment of DOD leaders to a proactive response in a media-saturated environment made the commitment more public and irrevocable, and therefore more credible (Weick 2001).

The communication of values was especially important precisely because DOD leadership were giving relatively few specific orders, but instead had to delegate authority to meet the demands of the crisis. In such conditions, leaders cannot rely on formal controls, and must depend upon cultural assumptions (Weick 2001). If DOD officials were unclear about which cultural assumptions were now appropriate, it would have resulted with some staff pursuing a “can-do” approach, while others maintaining the autonomy assumption passively resisting unfamiliar tasks. The ability of leaders to frame the response in the context of the widely-shared “can-do” assumption prevented such organizational incoherence.

Period Two: The “Can-Do” Response

The switch to a proactive response was felt immediately on the ground. Captain McDaniel noted “The pendulum swung from one extreme to the other through this. I mean, it went from

having to pry Secretary Rumsfeld's fingers off of a helicopter package...and this 100-pound gorilla just goes, 'Okay, we've got it.' Boom, and then the floodgates open” (Senate 2006, p.26-25). Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Deputy Secretary Michael Jackson described it as “one of the best examples of cutting through bureaucratic red tape and getting on with the job” (Senate 2006, p.26-43).

The DOD no longer allocated resources by carefully vetting FEMA requests. If requests were not specific enough, the DOD officials would now fill in the details and move ahead. In addition, the DOD sought to anticipate FEMA requests by making available what resources it thought appropriate. When FEMA requested resources, the DOD was ready to provide them. If the DOD felt that resources could be usefully deployed, but FEMA had not already requested those resources, the DOD generally put them in operation anyway, and then drafted its own requests for assistance, which it passed on to FEMA to submit to the DOD via official channels. For example, US Transportation Command began airlifts from New Orleans airport on Thursday morning, but it was not until that evening that the DOD received a mission assignment to airlift evacuees, and this assignment was not processed until Friday. The majority of military resources deployed, worth about \$805 million, were already in the process of execution by the time they were officially approved by the Secretary of Defense.

At the same time, the appointment of Honoré to lead Joint Task Force Katrina provided another means by which the normal procedural constraints could be bypassed. Honoré typified the “can-do” culture, and now enjoyed both significant discretion and logistical support denied to him prior to the culture-switch. JDOMS directives allow local military commanders to make use of military resources without prior permission to “save lives, prevent human suffering, or mitigate great property damage under imminently serious conditions.” Active duty personnel

helped with the evacuation, searched for survivors, assisted rescues, and maintained law and order. Honoré, in many instances, replaced the JDOMS process – taking requests for state and local officials, evaluating them, and deploying resources. Louisiana officials often did not make a formal request for assets but simply asked Honoré, who preferred such an informal approach: “[I]n this case, we've got a case where we need to save life and limb. We can't wait for a [Request for Assistance] or shouldn't be waiting for one. If there's capability, we need to start moving” (Senate Report 2006, p.26-29). The House Report (2006, p.204) notes that “(t)his request outside of normal channels may reflect frustration with the bureaucratic process.”

Even as the DOD accepted a crisis response mission with a “can-do” energy, the underlying cultural preference for autonomy remained, surfacing in other ways. While responsive in aiding FEMA, the DOD defined the terms and timing of its help. By committing to an all-out effort, it largely edged FEMA aside, dictating what resources it would provide before FEMA could formulate requests. In testimony to the Senate, Scott Wells of FEMA likened the DOD to an 800 pound gorilla: “You're supposed to take care of that gorilla and be responsible for that gorilla, but that 800-pound gorilla is going to do what he wants to do when he wants to do it and how he wants to do it.”

This autonomy assumption was also reflected in the operations of Joint Task Force Katrina. The Task Force essentially represented a separate field command in addition to the civilian Joint Field Office, and the Principal Federal Official. The Task Force did little to coordinate the requests it received from state and local officials with other commands. This further weakened the prospect for unified command. For example, FEMA officials had devised a plan for evacuating the Superdome, but their efforts were suspended by Honoré, who, at the request of Governor Blanco, implemented a separate evacuation plan.

Discussion: Conditions and Implications of Culture-Switching

The case analysis suggests some basic conditions conducive to culture-switching. Culture-switching is likely to occur if a dominant cultural assumption limits the ability of the organization to respond to challenges. Crises or other forms of external shocks may prompt such a mismatch between cultural assumptions and organizational needs, creating an environment where some preexisting cultural traits become more favored than others. But such a mismatch may also gradually occur under normal conditions in a less perceptible fashion.

The case also shows that another condition for successful culture-switching is leadership with sensemaking skills. Culture-switching requires leaders capable of: recognizing how different cultural assumptions exist and matter in their organization; making sense of when these assumptions are appropriate; and, communicating these assumptions. The DOD had such leaders.

The importance of leadership sensemaking becomes clearer when we consider the DHS response to Katrina. DHS leaders failed to make sense of Katrina in a timely fashion. Secretary Chertoff did not declare an Incident of National Significance until late the day after landfall. But even then, the altered worldview of DHS leaders remained of limited utility because they lacked detailed organizational knowledge of their resources and capacities. For example, there was confusion on the relative roles and responsibilities of the Principal Federal Officer and the Federal Coordinating Officer on the ground, limiting the ability to establish unified command. In large part this lack of organizational knowledge was because the DHS itself was a new organization, made of 22 separate organizational units with their own cultural histories, and charged with implementing untested policies introduced just a year before Katrina. The DHS

also suffered extraordinary turnover of both career and political staff before Katrina. The task of sensemaking is difficult enough for actors with a deep understanding of how stable organizational cultural assumptions and resources can be rearranged to respond to the unexpected, but is even more daunting for actors in a new organization with only a sketchy understanding of organizational capacities. Even if they wished to, DHS leaders could not call upon well-established and widely shared cultural assumptions. Boin, Hart, McConnell and Preston (2010) further document how psychological aspects of leadership style affect the capacity to respond in the aftermath of disaster, showing how the leadership traits of President Bush led him to a hands-off management approach that relied very much on the quality of his subordinates, with largely negative results.

The analysis also offers some implications for how we might think about culture. The case points to the need to find the right organizational culture to deal with a crisis, but suggests that this can be best done by building on existing cultural assumptions rather than pursuing significant cultural change. For example, the White House Katrina report recommended a “culture of preparedness” to enable agencies to step away from turf-protection, and encourages initiative and innovation (White House 2006, p.79, 81). While few would argue against such a culture, the White House recommendation dramatically understates the difficulty of building a new culture across the many government agencies that deal with crisis management, especially if this new culture conflicts with deeply embedded assumptions.

Both of the major DOD cultural assumptions discussed in this case predate the leaders involved. These leaders would not have been able to invent overnight any cultural attributes that did not already exist. Rather, the case suggests a more modest claim: that the leaders recognized

the need to switch between the two cultural assumptions, and were capable of making this switch.

Finally, the analysis also has implications for the study of red tape. It expands our understanding of how the interaction of red tape and culture matters to performance. Unlike previous work on this hypothesis, the article illustrates how different aspects of the same organization's culture can interact with red tape to affect performance. In some contexts, a cultural assumption that lends itself to rule adherence can dominate, thereby limiting responsiveness. In other periods, more mission-oriented cultural attributes can come to the fore, allowing the organization to mediate the negative impact of red tape on performance.

A well-established claim is that what constitutes red tape depends upon where you sit, reflecting the idea that different political actors value rules and goals differently (Bozeman 2000, pp.82-3). In the case, we see an illustration of this. In contrast to their DOD counterparts other Katrina responders consistently viewed JDOMS procedures as a form of red tape. This is not an insignificant point when we consider the increasingly networked nature not just of crisis response, but almost all forms of governance (Moynihan 2009). Competing definitions of what constitutes red tape among a network of actors will shape the perceived costs of coordination, a central factor in the calculus of cooperation that networks depend upon.

The analysis also offers another point about the contingent nature of red tape. What constitutes red tape depends not just on where you sit, but on *when* you sit. If we accept the definition of red tape as rules that create a compliance burden without serving a legitimate purpose (Bozeman 2000), we also need to understand that organizational goals evolve, and what are legitimate rules for the same set of actors in one time period can later become red tape. The DOD perspective on whether the JDOMS constituted red tape changed as the organizational

goal-set changed. Early in the Katrina response JDOMS procedures were not viewed as red tape by DOD officials, because they effectively served the autonomy assumption. DOD leaders then decided that responding to Katrina was a primary organizational goal, at least in the short term. As this point, the compliance burden of JDOMS increased to the point that it was considered red tape even by DOD officials. Organizations unable to recognize the varying compliance burden of rules in different situations will adhere to costly rules during crises, resulting in a failure of adaptive response.

Conclusion

The primary contribution of this article is to develop and illustrate the concept of culture-switching, apply it to a theoretical and empirical setting, and consider what the analysis suggests about the conditions for and implications of culture-switching. The article also informs a relatively simple but popular narrative about how the role of the DOD during Katrina. The analysis illustrates how the response – both DOD’s widely praised actions, but also its less well-known initial inertia – was tied to different aspects of military culture. The article is not intended to explain the failure of other organizations such as FEMA in Katrina – there were many other factors at play there – but provides some insight into why FEMA had difficulty in working with its most important federal partner, and why the overall Katrina response network struggled.

The basic tensions the DOD experienced during Katrina were not a one-off, but instead are likely to reoccur again and again as the military is increasingly asked to take on novel tasks. Just months after Katrina, in November 2005, President Bush signed Presidential Directive 3000.5, mandating that the DOD would support security, stability, transition and reconstruction operations. The directive was significant in a number of ways. As a matter of policy and military doctrine, it made clear that the DOD would continue to be asked to take on tasks and relationships it has

avoided, requiring interagency, multinational cooperation in tasks such as disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, and reconstruction. The discussions that led to the new directive predated Katrina, and were more influenced by the experiences of the US military in Bosnia, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq. The directive explicitly redefined and expanded the definition of core military mission to include tasks and forms of cooperation that had been traditionally resisted. The directive is therefore also significant as an overt effort to alter basic underlying DOD cultural assumptions, which in turn alters calculations about what constitutes red tape. It is possible that DOD leaders during to Katrina were already reacting to this upcoming policy change. But there is no doubt that they will be forced to find ways to meld their organizational culture with new demands in a more systematic way than occurred during Katrina.

Beyond the DOD, is this article generalizable? At best, one can only make contingent claims about the generalizability of single case studies (George and Bennett 2004, p.30). It is, however, useful to distinguish between theoretical and empirical generalizability. An analysis is more likely to be theoretically relevant to other settings if it deals with frequently occurring social phenomena, and it is difficult to think of an organizational setting where culture and red tape are not relevant.

Claims of empirical generalizability are more limited if the case is unusual. One caveat to the case, therefore, is the military setting. Leaders in less hierarchical settings may have a more difficult time directing the switch between cultural assumptions. On the other hand, the case shows that culture-switching occurred under conditions of highly delegated authority rather than hierarchical control. A second caveat is that the case evidence looks at an organization responding to a crisis, and therefore does not necessarily generalize to normal conditions. But it is worth noting that responding to crises is not unusual, but in some respect a routine and

“normal” aspect of organizational life (Perrow 1999), especially in the public sector (Boin et al, 2010).

While most organizational leaders will not find themselves in the situation that DOD leaders faced, they can learn from how they responded. Large mature organizations feature multiple cultural assumptions and evolving challenges. The capacity to engage in culture-switching may be an important and understudied factor that contributes to organizational survival and performance.

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