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Paying it Forward
Leading with Purpose
with Chief Randy R. Bruegman, (Ret)

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When You Lose Sight of the Big Picture

Often those in leadership positions can get so focused that they lose sight of the bigger picture. Back when I was a young company officer, I was running a fire station and was assigned as the supervisor of an engine company. It was a few days before Christmas, light snow was falling outside when we were dispatched in the evening to a reported apartment fire with smoke showing from the building. We donned our gear and responded to the fire; we were to be the first company on the scene.

When we arrived there was heavy smoke blowing out of the first floor entry of the building, and the rest of the structure was heavily charged with smoke. Upon arrival it's customary for the first arriving company officer to give a size up report, which I did. As I surveyed the building, I could see on the third floor to the right of where the engine was parked a bright glow that was emitting from the window, so that's where I thought the fire was. I reported that we had a

working fire in a three story apartment building on the third floor, and we were pulling hand lines to attack to attack the fire. I outlined to the additional crews their initial assignments when they arrived and my crew went to work advancing a hose line into the building, up to the stairwell to the third floor to locate and attack the fire.

As we began to pull our handline down the third floor we did a quick primary search for residents in the apartments that we passed. About halfway down the hall I noticed that we weren't experiencing an increase in heat, but it didn't register at the time. When we got to the door where we thought the fire was there were no signs of fire, and as we entered the room, although it was heavily charged with smoke, there was no heat. When we entered the apartment we found a Menorah with candles sitting on the windowsill. I had perceived that the glow from the Menorah candles was the fire. As we reentered the hallway to continue our search on the third floor, fire was now rolling down the hallway at ceiling level towards us from the direction we had come from, where the fire was actually was, at the opposite end of the building.



I had placed my crew in a very tenuous situation because of my myopic perspective on what was actually occurring in the building when we arrived. As the fire rolled overhead down the hallway toward us, the second crew arrived with hand lines coming up the stairwell. They were able to knock the fire down and put it out. As we exited the building I knew that, because of my tunnel vision on this incident, that I very well could have caused serious injury to my crew, placing the building residents and the structure in jeopardy.

After the incident was wrapped, I sat on the tailboard of the engine with my crew. First of all, I apologized to them for putting them in

a situation that was extremely dangerous and unnecessary. We talked through the issue of what we could have done better, **what I could have done better**, and began to pick up to return to the station. My Battalion Chief walked over and sat next to me on the tailboard and said, “You were incredibly lucky tonight. Take a lesson from this: you can't get so focused on what you think you know that you lose sight of the bigger picture.”

In this situation, I failed to do some basic things we're taught as a company officer, one of which is that the first thing to do is a 360-degree walk-around of the building to make sure that you know what's actually

occurring on all sides of the structure. As the late author Molly Ivins put it: “He was so narrow minded he could see through a keyhole with both eyes.” Situational awareness for any leadership position is critical if you're to be successful in any a given situation, and I failed to do that. So, why did that happen? As I analyzed this event, there were several factors that led me to be so focused that I lost situational awareness; we will explore the reasons in this writing. But what I didn't know at the time was that the lessons that I learned from this incident would carry me forward throughout the rest of my career.

United Flight 173

When one's vision narrows, either by one's power and authority or their personal attributes, it can create blindness to what is actually occurring. The situational awareness disappears, and that is when organizations and people pay a heavy price. A classic example of this happened on Dec. 28, 1978, on a United Airlines Flight scheduled to fly from New York City Portland, Oregon, with a scheduled stop in Denver, Colorado.

During the plane's approach to land, a light came on indicating that there was a landing gear problem. The crew members in the cockpit couldn't determine if the right main landing gear had come down properly. So, they decided to fly a holding pattern near the airport to make sure the landing gear was in the correct position. After about an hour fixated on this issue, the plane was getting dangerously low on fuel. The flight engineer was giving hints to the captain that the plane was going to run out of fuel, but never was expressive in his communication regarding the fuel situation because the captain wanted to know what was going on with the landing gear. When the captain and the copilot realized how low on fuel they were, they declared an emergency and tried to land at the airport as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the plane ran out of fuel and crash-landed in a neighborhood, killing ten on board.

At that point in time in the aviation industry, whatever decision a captain would make would be final without question from the copilot or flight engineer. A classic example of losing sight of the big picture, but also how professional culture can dictate and impact the outcomes of an organization or an event.

This crash led the airline industry to adopt a process called **Crew Resource Management (CRM)**. CRM is the effective use of all available resources to assure safe and efficient operations, reducing errors, and increasing efficiencies through enhanced communication strategies, collectively maintaining situational awareness, and strengthening decision making: a good strategy for any team, no matter what profession you are in. Myopia is one of the most common causes of leadership failures and this problem is compounded when the pressure is on and there is a lot at stake. What are some of the causes that lead us to lose our situational awareness?

Overconfidence can lead to complacency. When you have done something so many times and the outcome has been a success, it can lead to complacency in your preparation for or your actions at the next event. That is what happened to me during that apartment fire. “Been there, done that,” is the attitude that will often get you in trouble. Whatever it is -- your next fire call, your next speaking engagement, your next budget

presentation, shareholders meeting, your morning safety briefing at the construction site -- preparation is key, and overconfidence creates complacency.

Know your limitations. As a leader, knowing your strengths is extremely important as you can focus on them and continue to develop them further. But knowing your limitations is just as, if not more, important. Knowing your limits is essential to self-growth and is the recognition of where weakness and your blind spots may be. That recognition of your limitations is the first step in your professional development plan. Leaders, because of their title or experience, often forget their own limitations and become oblivious to what is occurring around them. That is when they often lose sight of the bigger picture, and that is when mistakes are made.

Ego. Our ego is our self-esteem and our sense of personal identity. It is made up of our beliefs about our strengths, our talents, and our abilities, and is the motivation behind the pursuit of success and our drive to be better... but it can often create blind spots for us. When confronted with



information that is inconsistent with our own beliefs about who we are and what we are good at, it will often reconcile the apparent contradiction by rejecting, ignoring, or reconciling the information to fit our own schema or view of the world. These mental frameworks also cause us to exclude pertinent information to focus instead only on things that confirm our pre-existing beliefs and ideas. Don't let your ego take you where you can't see the forest for the trees.

The Lack of Situational Awareness

In a study of accidents involving major airlines, 88% of those involving human error were problems with situation awareness rather than decision making or flight skills (Endsley, 1995). I believe that similar studies in other fields would likely indicate the same. The lack of situational awareness, losing sight of the big picture, can affect even the most experienced person, especially when performing routine and non-routine task. Situational awareness is knowing what is going on in the environment you are operating and its potential impact on the present and the future. While this might sound straightforward in a stable and simple situation, it becomes a real challenge in a fast paced and complex environment. This makes situational

situational awareness a concept that is especially relevant for situations characterized by a high level of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Do any of those descriptions resonate within your organization?

Research indicates that a lack of situational awareness is often:

- A result of people not perceiving information as critical to the outcome of a process or event; not seeing the big picture.
- A failure to understand the relevant information they received and how it may impact their situation. Be aware of how your schema or mental frameworks can cause you to exclude pertinent information.
- A failure to accurately predict what would happen next with the information they received. This is especially critical when dynamic operations or processes are projected into the future that are based off of wrong assumptions.

Just as CRM is critical in aviation, military, and the emergency services, developing Team Situational Awareness is a must for organizations and teams that are working in the environments previously noted. The

world in and around our organizations are changing so rapidly, it takes everyone being on the lookout for changes that are happening in real time that may have a negative impact on the organization. Gone are the days when centralized reconnaissance and decision making is viable; in most organizations today, that model will put you out of business. Today, situational awareness must start on the shop floor and extend throughout your organization to the C-Suite with everyone's understanding that:

- Communication and information exchange is critical at all levels.
- Everyone must be aware of their surroundings and what is occurring in their space in the organization, and identify potential problems and solutions as soon as possible.
- Developing team or organizational situational awareness today is a foundational element for an organization to be successful and sustainable in the long-term.

Developing organizational or team situational awareness is one of the most important strategies you can use to improve your chances of making good decisions.

Chief B's Key Leadership Takeaways

Having the honor of speaking to great leaders in their profession in **The Leadership Crucible Podcast**, we make notes on the key leadership takeaways that are discussed. Will share those with you in hopes that it help you to reflect on your own leadership style, but also to provide some potential talking points that you can discuss with your team. Doing so is a great way to understand your teams, gain perspective on topics, helps you to gain a deeper understanding of how your individual team members think. It is an excellent way to build you team.

- ✓ Situational awareness is about knowing what is going on around you.
- ✓ To achieve the highest level of situational awareness, you must have a 360 degree mindset.
- ✓ The days of centralized reconnaissance and decision making in most organizations is a model that will either put you out of business or create significant liabilities.
- ✓ Situational awareness is often the result of people not perceiving information as important and failing to understand its relevance and impact.

- ✓ Never get so focused on what you think you know that you lose sight of the bigger picture.
- ✓ Developing a 360 degree mindset within you workforce and company culture is the foundation of building situational awareness.
- ✓ You can't just talk situational awareness; you must invest in the training of your workforce to create a 360 degree organizational mindset.
- ✓ Be aware how your own schema and biases can create blind spots for you.
- ✓ It starts with your people on the ground level, because it is those people that will likely notice a problem first.

Often we find ourselves in situations that we grow accustomed to over time because they have become routine. This can be in organizations, work, groups, or even families. We accept situations or organizations that are actually toxic or detrimental to us because of acclimation. It's like a frog in the slowly heating pan of water; you lose perspective on the circumstance you are in until it is too late. To develop team situational awareness, we need other people we trust with knowledge and experience to tell us what they see. Shared vision is the foundation to do that.



Readers are Leaders

I believe that, to be a good leader, one must be on a continuous quest to gain more knowledge. The leadership benefits of reading are wide-ranging. John Coleman’s article in the Harvard Business Review, “For Those Who Want To Lead, Read,” highlights that the leadership benefits of reading are wide-ranging. Evidence suggests that reading can improve intelligence and lead to innovation and insight, and, for example, some studies have shown that reading makes you smarter through “a larger vocabulary and more world knowledge in addition to the abstract reasoning skills.”

Reading has many benefits, but it is underappreciated as an essential component of leadership development. To that end, we’ll provide a few suggested titles for you to consider reading.

***The Power of Noticing:
What the Best Leaders See***

by Max Bazerman

***Overcoming Organizational Myopia:
Breaking Through Siloed Organizations***

by John Knott

***The Fearless Organization:
Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace
for Learning, Innovation, and Growth***

by Amy C. Edmondson

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