The sharp end: real life challenges in a complex activity space

Keith T. Thomas* and Allan D. Walker†

1Centre for Learning Enhancement and Research, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, PR China
2Asia Pacific Centre for Leadership and Change, Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong, PR China

Many forces are at play beneath the public face of organizations and particular tensions emerge when policy rhetoric encounters organizational and leadership reality. These inherent contextual tensions are explored at the sharp or operational end of leadership, the organizational space where policies are implemented, values enacted and practices evidenced. The sharp end leaves little room for intellectual introspection or detailed post hoc analysis favoured by those more detached from the action. However, the sharp end does provide a useful position from which to explore the so-called ‘crisis of leadership ethics’. Describing a complex activity space, this paper highlights how individual biases, group dynamics and countervailing forces shape behaviour, and their collective influence can often derail well-intentioned actions by creating irrational moments that spiral out of control.

Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

Among the many consequences of the recent financial ‘crisis’ is an apparent mistrust of corporate leaders and the public regulatory agencies charged with watching them. In many discussions, the crisis has been linked to a general failure of leadership and, more specifically, the absence of appropriate ethics. Indeed Zakaria (2009) labels the near collapse of the financial system a moral crisis. Central to the call for ethics and greater accountability is a failure of self-regulation. The difficulty is that regardless of any reforms put in place, not everything can be written down and not everything that is legally permissible is ethical. Consequently, while acknowledging a need for ethics, we suggest it may be more productive to look below the surface of dramatic and sometimes seeming unethical actions and ask why leaders make the decisions they make.

In this paper, we suggest that many forces are at play beneath the public face of organizations and that there are particular tensions when policy rhetoric encounters the organizational and leadership reality. These contextual tensions are inherent in most activity, but most evident at the sharp or operational end of leadership, where policies...
are implemented, values enacted and practices evidenced. The sharp end leaves little room for intellectual introspection or detailed *post hoc* analysis favoured by those more detached from the action. In our view, it also is a useful place from which to analyse the so-called ‘crisis of leadership ethics’.

Beginning with the financial sector, we then illustrate much of the discussion using a public sector organization—the military. This paper draws on insights from hazardous technologies and safety practice to develop a framework to help explain why individuals and aggregated on a larger scale, organizations, even whole economies, despite safeguards, can sometimes run off the tracks. As analysis suggests, ‘*our actions are always shaped and limited by local circumstances*’ (Reason, 2008: 75), and often compliance or violation is ‘*neither intrinsically good nor bad*’ (Reason, 2008: 60), it depends on the context. Similarly, leadership actions are often also neither good nor bad, but may be labelled thus (or brave or foolhardy) only after ensuing success or failure.

The paper is organized into five sections, each illustrated by relevant examples. The first section teases out the debate around individual leader ethics and leadership and organizational misfortune. The purpose is not to debate the meaning of ethics in leadership in any detail—this is not our point. Rather, we argue that pointing the ethical finger at leaders is easier than exploring where and why leaders make the decisions they do. The second section describes the leadership realities and explains further, what we mean by the *sharp end*. These realities and related, often conflicting, internal and external demands muddy the waters of leadership and help define the ethical landscape at the sharp end. In the third section, we attempt to organize some leadership realities through a multi-stage framework that illustrates the interconnected activity space in terms of individual and organizational dynamics. In the fourth section, we use two cases to illustrate the activity space to flag some challenges and tensions at the sharp end, while the fifth section draws on the preceding analysis to identify some countervailing forces that may be used to support leadership practice at the sharp end.

**When things go badly wrong**

Reflecting on the 2008 global financial crisis, while pre-crisis actions broke no laws and markets are subject to certain cycles, there is also universal agreement that the banks got things badly wrong (Tett, 2009), as did public watchdogs and regulators. Given the complexity of the situation and the hidden workings of so many different systems, agreement on why will probably never be reached (Faiola *et al.*, 2009; Zakaria, 2009). Nor is it important. Based on past example, our argument is that a lack of ethics is not a sufficient explanation and that public policy must look wider, at other factors at play, if we are to obviate more failures.

As such, we do not use ethics to explain leadership and corporate failure, nor do we explore ethics *per se*. However, some basic introduction to the area helps set the scene for deeper explanations. In the singular, ethics is a conversation which aims to answer the question, ‘*What ought one to do*’ (Ethics Centre, 2009)? In the plural, ethics may refer to ‘*a social, religious or civil code of behaviour*’ that is considered correct, especially in the context of a group or profession. Ethical standards are normally applied to individuals and used to explain behaviour considered in some way deviant. Ethics are likely to be applied more intensely to leader actions, where the decisions and consequences tend to be more influential, visible or far reaching.

Failure, regardless of its level of impact, is often attributed to a lack of leadership. In other words, according to dominant belief systems, the leader—as an individual—is ultimately responsible for whatever happens on ‘*their patch*’. This may be an overly simplistic notion, but it is consistent with one of the two broad ways of viewing failure: a person-based approach or a systems approach (Reason, 2000). Each approach has important practical implications for understanding leader’s behaviour.
The most commonly applied approach is person-based, which focuses on errors and procedural violations as a result of inattention, poor motivation, negligence or recklessness. A variation of the person-based approach is to apportion a darker side to leadership—of greed, ethical misconduct, even criminality. This perspective invites a focus on the disposition, character and/or personality type of leaders themselves and ends up in judgements that these leaders are corrupted, unethical scoundrels.

Blaming individuals is easy and emotionally satisfying—the target is more readily discernible than a complex, non-human system (Reason, 2000). However, does branding an individual as unethical provide a plausible explanation for the financial crisis? Can we blame the person who threw the first rock for the riot? We hold that the answers to both questions are the same, unproductive, and that if we are to learn and prevent future mistakes we must dig more deeply, to identify explanations that are more complex. We suggest that the task here is to focus on how systems work and how this affects the decision leaders make.

A systems approach operates on the premise that humans are fallible in both benign and sinister ways and so errors or intentional deviations (including deviance) are to be expected, even in the best organizations. These errors and deviations should however be seen as ‘consequences rather than causes’ (Reason, 2000: 768). Hence, the origin of failure may be linked to upstream systemic factors and countermeasures do not target change in humans, but on changing the conditions under which they work.

Leadership realities

Because it is a key driver of organizational performance, leadership has attracted huge interest from researchers and practitioners alike (Mumford et al., 2003; Murray and Chapman, 2003; Dexter and Prince, 2007). Among the many definitions of leadership, it can be described as a contextually-sensitive social process that facilitates collective action towards a common goal (Rost and Baker, 2000). Central to this definition is the importance of context, though studies of leadership privilege the view of leaders as heroic figures and reduce critical inspection of structural–contextual factors (Sinclair, 2005). Others note that the environment has become more complex (Senge, 1995; Castells, 2000) and that this has in turn encouraged distributed forms of leadership (Gronn, 2003), and raised the importance of learning, change, cultural identity and society (CCL, 1998). In short, much of what has been written about leadership has emphasized the positive, of leaders effecting change for the good of their organization or even the broader society, while the darker effects of context are somewhat downplayed.

Yet, in stark contrast to the hope vested in leadership, the past decades have witnessed a series of high profile failures and associated scandals. Examples of failed leadership include Enron, Hollinger International and Tyco in the U.S., Parmalat in Italy and the National Australia Bank and building products manufacturer James Hardie in Australia. The problem with leadership is of course not limited to the corporate sector, with similar issues emerging in the military, police, education, church, health care industry and politics. Leadership effectiveness is itself a contentious issue (Kets de Vries, 1994), the point well showcased by once admired leaders, such as Mugabe in Zimbabwe, Charles Taylor in Liberia, even Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan and recently Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan, who have all since fallen from their mantles. These initial champions of democracy have variably come to be seen as calculating politicians and autocrats with little regard for human rights (Dalrymple, 2008; Baker, 2009; Doyle, 2009).

In sum, leadership failure and doubts about the moral/ethical character of leaders is not new or restricted to the corporate sector. What is new though is the scale and visibility of apparent leadership failure. There is also an apparent increased sensitivity to unethical behaviour.
These concerns collectively suggest a critical examination of behaviour that all too often is shrouded by unwritten, perhaps illogical organizational norms and human fallibilities. The sharp end, where policy rhetoric meets organizational reality, is an ideal opportunity to examine leadership and its handmaiden failure.

The sharp end

The term sharp end refers to leaders of any ilk, either individual or group, at the front line of institutional activity. In an anecdotal story drawn from World War I, to cadets at the West Point Military Academy, U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates clearly distinguishes the challenge at the sharp end. Reminding cadets of a conversation between then Captain Marshall and the Expeditionary Force Commander General Pershing, in the words of the junior officer, while higher headquarters may have their troubles, ‘ours [at the sharp end] are immediate and every day and have to be solved before night’ (Gates, 2008). At the sharp end, time to think is short and decisions, perhaps involving life and death, must be made under pressure, with little opportunity to properly consider options or seek advice—there is no safety net.

At the sharp end, failures are usually active failures—the result of some action. These failures have immediate and usually short-lived effects, in contrast to latent—usually system—failures that can lie dormant for a long while until they interact with local conditions to great effect. Given this immediacy and unpredictability of leading at the sharp end, it is no surprise that when things go wrong, decisions taken can easily look irrational, inhuman or even unethical. However, there is also a positive side to this clarity in failure—it affords an unambiguous opportunity to understand the interaction between person and situation.

Based on a categorization of activity by type (few or many novel cases) and complexity of finding solutions (easy to hard), four broad types can be defined (Perrow, 1967):

1. Those involving many non-routine, poorly structured and unpredictable organizational activities that by nature of the problem are hard to solve such as military operations, investment banking, politics and crisis management;

2. Those involving many non-routine activities, but the nature of problem solutions is mostly relatively easy such as police work and project management exploration;

3. Those involving few exceptional cases and mostly easy problem solutions such as operating a production line and traditional banking and

4. Those involving few exceptional cases, but usually hard problem solutions such as operating nuclear plants, modern aircraft and geriatric medicine.

The complex realities on military operations are well described by U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates. Turning again to his address to military cadets at West Point, he warned them:

‘...[they could] expect more irregular and difficult conflicts of varying types in the years ahead... accompanied by real dilemmas posed by a non-linear environment made up of civilians, detainees, contractors, embedded media, and an adversary that does not wear uniforms or obey the laws of war. Moreover, this adversary could be your enemy on one day or, as we’ve seen in Iraq’s Anbar Province, your partner the next (Gates, 2008).

The final sentence in Gates’ statement is particularly interesting, as it highlights an often-dark side to this leadership reality. Used as a metaphor, the dark side refers to the shadow or hidden and unknown aspects of a person or activity. Thus, for example, soon after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre, U.S. Vice President Cheney reportedly commented: ‘...We have to work the dark side, if you will. Spend time in the shadows of the intelligence world’ (Elliott, 2007). There are also, as we illustrate, potentially serious (unin-
tended) costs associated with the dark side. The ‘work’ that Cheney alluded to, as the truth emerges, included ‘extraordinary renditions’, in which terrorist suspects were snatched from one country and sent to another, often to face harsh interrogations. It also included a domestic eavesdropping program by the US National Security Agency, without the requisite approvals of a secret court, thus effectively subverting control processes set up after another leadership failure—the 1970s Watergate crisis (Brinkley, 2008).

We turn now to examine some representative cases that illustrate aspects of the realities of leadership at the sharp end. The aim is to briefly present the conflicting internal and external demands, the dark elements and the potential unintended consequences that can accompany operational military activity.

Case: Children Overboard

This incident in late October 2001, emerging out of the Australian Defence Force’s expanded role under a new border protection regime, involved a naval vessel the HMAS Adelaide and a vessel carrying refugees, known as SIEV 4 (Senate, 2002). Politically, the Children Overboard controversy involved a claim by the Government, based on an oral and uncorroborated report made during a telephone conversation in the midst of a complex tactical operation by a ship’s commander, that ‘boat people’ (refugees and asylum seekers) threw their children overboard (Forbes et al., 2002). Reflecting powerful external imperatives, the peculiar sensitivity in the claim of children thrown overboard was that it was made at the beginning of and sustained throughout a Federal election campaign. Importantly, during this campaign, ‘border protection’ and national security were key issues. The claim that asylum seekers were the kinds of people who would throw their children overboard was used by the Government to demonize them as part of the argument for the need for a ‘tough’ stand against external threats and of ‘putting Australia’s interests first’ (Senate, 2002).

Overall, the Children Overboard incident embroiled junior and senior leaders of the Australian Defence fraternity in a professionally and personally damaging debate over conflicting evidence. The subsequent Senate Select Committee investigation reported genuine miscommunication or misunderstanding, inattention, avoidance of responsibility, a public service culture of responsiveness and perhaps over-responsiveness to the needs of ministers and deliberate deception motivated by political expedience. Noting also the ‘sequence of unusual features surrounding the treatment of SIEV 4’, the Committee pointed to the likelihood that the Government had decided early to make an example of SIEV 4 (Senate, 2002: xxv). Nor was there any correction, retraction or communication about the existence of doubts in connection with the alleged incident itself or the photographs as evidence for it made by any member of the Federal Government before the election on 10 November 2001. Worse, the Defence Minister was reported as having made a number of misleading statements and of having deceived the Australian people—in short, of being intentionally ‘unethical’.

Case: the USS Vincennes

Unlike the complex, political manipulation behind the Children Overboard incident, this tragic incident, which involved the accidental shoot down of an Iranian civilian aircraft (Flight 655) by USS Vincennes in July 1988, is an example of an intentional action by a military leader under considerable duress. Nonetheless, like the previous case, this incident needs to be seen against the backdrop of powerful external political considerations. In the case of the USS Vincennes, competing national interests and a collusive in-group ethos shaped the unfortunate event. The official story surrounding this incident was of an American warship minding its own business. However, the real story involved an
undeclared war in which the U.S. was ironically de facto allies of Saddam Hussein and Iraq in its war against Iran. The subsequent unfortunate chain of events, as shown on the TV program Nightline, were set in motion by decoy distress transmissions from a phantom merchant vessel organized by U.S. forces in the region to lure out Iranian gunboats from the islands in the Strait of Hormuz (Koppel, 1992). Compounding the tensions, the Vincennes had minutes earlier been under fire from an Iranian gunboat and as the ship’s commander states, when the approaching aircraft reached minimum weapons range a decision had to be made and so it was. Reflecting the difficulties in command, he comments:

*The aircraft was warned, warned a number of times, [but] continued to close. Time is a demon here. If I have a long time to sort things out, you’re going to take more time to look at this and more time to look at that* (Nightline TV program, Koppel, 1992).

Continuing, in retrospect and despite innocent people’s lives being lost, he viewed the decision was proper as his overall and overriding responsibility at the time was to his ship and his crew (Koppel, 1992). Even so, the reason the USS Vincennes was in location, based on a speech by President Regan in 1987, was to do with a political imperative—to ensure free use of the vital sea-lanes of the Persian Gulf. Consistent with this wider though less known imperative, the subsequent response by the Government to the accidental shoot-down of Flight 655, in the midst of a Presidential campaign, was described on the program as ‘a tissue of lies, fabrications, half-truths and omissions’.

**Unpredictable workplace realities**

What both these cases illustrate is not an ideological divide between any calls for regulation and deregulation, but the complex and unpredictable workplace realities that by nature are hard to solve. The specific realities play out at two levels: the immediate and pressing concerns at the operational and usually individual end, and the wider contextual pressures. What will also become apparent are several cognitive biases and irrational influences when we explore first the ethical landscape and then the wider interconnected activity space.

The ethical landscape is of course not painted in black and white, but in shades of grey spread across a spectrum of ethical concern applicable to general society, as well as specific to the military context. This spectrum can be described in terms of issues ranging from low-level and/or episodic to major and/or systemic. Figure 1 illustrates minor, intentional and unintentional slips to more significant, deliberate issues involving things such as tax avoidance, white collar crime, bullying, racist abuse, people smuggling and even war. Notably, some of these issues can appear on both sides of the spectrum.

Reflecting on the recent financial crisis, when asked why he did not suggest stricter

![Figure 1. Spectrum of ethical concern.](image-url)
capital requirements as an alternative in 1998, then U.S. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin reportedly said, ‘There was no political reality of getting it done... We had a lot going on’ (Faiola et al., 2009). One can only wonder about the leeway people at the sharp end and particularly leaders might be afforded when seeking to balance such things as mission achievement, proportionality at the tactical level, cultural judgements and consistent moral behaviour (Hartle, 2004).

In the two cases outlined, while it is hard to know the specifics, on the evidence at hand it is possible to argue that, like the financial crisis, there was a lot going on. Our focus though is on the contextual tensions and social influences. In the Children Overboard incident, while the commander and his ship’s company are above reproach, external actors and considerations caused the attendant difficulties. Contributing forces include local ‘noise’ or what is often called the ‘fog of war’, but there is also moral ambiguity and a shifting of responsibility at the tactical level. Further, up the chain, there is a dehumanization of refugees and intentional, politically inspired, deception. In the incident involving the USS Vincennes, we might again suggest local ‘noise’, plus dehumanization and moral ambiguity, plus a clear attempt to shift responsibility at several levels and powerful evidence of behavioural biases in action at the tactical level. Viewed in the wider context of the Iran–Iraq war, the intensive operational context invites aggressive norms. These norms collectively may have led to incremental degradation in the rules of engagement and certainly resulted in an unintentional wicked problem—wherein there are no ready ‘good’ solutions to factors embedded in a dynamic social context, only better, worse, good or not good enough solutions, which in this case resulted in a tragedy.

Reflecting on the unpredictable workplace realities, we might also consider the effect of what Reason (1997) called countervailing forces. These can either increase resistance (through factors such as commitment, competence, awareness and adequate resources) or increase vulnerability (through factors such as likelihood of detection, personal benefit and unfamiliar tasks) to exposure at both ends of the ethical spectrum. As Reason (1997: 114) also observes, ‘entropy usually wins in the end’, a reality that demands individual leaders and the wider organization remain vigilant and ready to defend against ever-present risk. To better understand this risk, we next examine possible countervailing forces and related challenges in a contextualized framework.

Towards a multi-dimensional contextual framework

In a military context, the potential for entropy is heightened by ‘savage quandaries’ that can arise in war (Hartle, 2004). Relating a ‘typically’ trying situation in Vietnam, a young officer explains that in attempting to assist and recover a wounded group of soldiers, he found his path blocked by a minefield. When he asked a local farmer to show him how to get through, he was refused. Desperate to move ahead, this officer says he ‘crossed the line’ by threatening to kill the farmer, explaining further that war was a ‘series of stark confrontations... faced under emotionally-wrenching conditions’ (Hartle, 2004: 3-4). He also added, ‘war is suffering and death of people you know, against the background of the suffering and death of those you do not’. In essence, you do what you think is best. The officer did reach the group and his actions did result in a man’s life being saved, so the argument could be that ‘in this case’ the ends justified the means. Yet, how does one limit the application? More crucially, as Hartle (2004: 4) observes, when crossing the line is repeated, it ‘corrodes the soul and warps moral sensibilities’. Collectively, an increased vulnerability to ethical failure over time is evident.

Figure 2 describes a multi-dimensional activity space. In this space, nominal challenges in terms of routine or exceptional errors and intentional violations are described at two levels, individual and organizational, and in terms of low-level and/or episodic issues to major and/or systemic ones.
While trying to increase resistance to failure through training and other mechanisms is necessary, these efforts are not likely to be ‘sufficient’. For example, as Reason (1990: 201) points out, people involved in incidents are mostly not reckless, stupid or blind to the consequences of their actions. Also, often it is the best people who make the worst mistakes (Reason, 2000). Consequently, we need to understand the tensions behind fallible decisions that result through either failure of or lack of expertise or intentional violations for usually perceived greater good. Two broad considerations are discussed next: irrational psychological impulses and cognitive biases, and collective behaviour.

Irrational psychological impulses

Systemic factors aside, there are psychological precursors that challenge the idea of man as a rational person. These concepts, drawn from behavioural psychology, highlight the power of context and the impact of irrational impulses that result from some common cognitive biases. For one thing, intuitive judgements typically help us navigate the many choices we must make in our everyday lives and these are especially important at the sharp end. The defining property of these judgements (of what comes to mind intuitively) is ‘accessibility’ of information. Based on research in decision making, what this means is that experienced decision makers working under pressure rarely need to choose between options, because in most cases, only a single option comes to mind (Kahneman, 2003). The reason, as Kahneman explains, is because the ‘hot’ state so of emotional and motivational arousal greatly increase the accessibility of thoughts that relate to the immediate emotion and current need, and reduces the accessibility of other thoughts.

Accessibility of information aside, short cuts through cognitive biases can also produce errors. These biases include: confirmation bias, where people outweigh information that confirms their viewpoint — such as rising stock market prices far beyond asset value; and availability bias, where decisions are based on the most recent information — stock price rise or fall and related herding effect — the tendency is to follow the crowd. Importantly, the clarity of retrospection also has major shortcomings compounded by the fact that we are often unaware of this influence. Called hindsight bias, there are two difficulties: first, hindsight tends to exaggerate what others should have been able to anticipate (or what they saw, if involved), and second, it causes uncertainty over how much outcome knowledge influences perception of events (Reason, 1990).

Figure 2. Activity space and nominal challenges.
Two other influences can bear down on individual decision-makers. First, the tendency to discount outcomes that are merely probable in comparison with outcomes that are certain, the certainty effect, can contribute to loss aversion. Simply, possible losses are seen as far more significant than any potential gain (Kahneman, 2003; Teece, 2007). Second, there is the tendency sometimes to overestimate the importance of character traits. This effect, called fundamental attribution error, can lead people to underestimate situational or contextual factors.

Collective behaviour

We turn now to explore briefly the less understood matter of collective behaviour (Quick and Kets de Vries, 2000; McNary, 2004). This issue introduces the reciprocal relationship between individual and group, and the consequent established way of doing things or organizational norms. Some potential and better known influences include blind loyalty to the leader, the tendency towards group-think and an escalation of commitment that can cause people to not respond to the realities of the situation (Reiter-Palmon and Illies, 2004).

There are, however, other more sinister influences. A study that modelled escape behaviour in emergency situations (Kugihara, 2001), for example, offers insight into collective norms that can emerge in groups, particularly such as those at the sharp end. This study noted that when group members had an option of aggressive behaviour, the salience of the aggressive norm in a larger group was stronger than that in a smaller group. However, once competitive and aggressive norms formed in a small group, competitive and aggressive behaviours could become more severe than that of a larger group. Reinforcing the effect of aggressive norms, an earlier study (Mack, 1986 citing a study by Broyles, 1985) of soldiers in Vietnam highlights the liberating effect of dehumanizing slang to describe the enemy and his homes (gooks, hooches), and the 'love of destruction and the thrill of killing' by otherwise thoughtful men. This propensity was encouraged not by any political cause or hatred of the enemy, but by the forces of comradeship, the freedom and escape from everyday bonds, the chance to test one's physical and emotional limits and the seeming power over life and death (Mack, 1986).

We next illustrate some of the many interconnections and inherent complexity in any incident, using the activity framework.

Illustrating the activity space framework

With the wisdom of hindsight, it is possible to explain the financial crash as starting with credit default swaps (CDS), a novel set of products developed by a group of bankers (Tett, 2009). While obviously extremely complex, the essence of the story is how a set of ideas (CDS) that once seemed good turned bad over a period of two decades. This product, created in a situation of moral ambiguity (quadrant 3), diffused around the global economy through social influence (quadrant 4) and aided by herding and a shift in responsibility (quadrant 1) spawned a credit bubble and wicked problem (quadrant 2).

The financial crisis story is also compelling for what people did not do—the shift of responsibility effected by a culture of silence (quadrant 1), as bankers initially associated with CDS failed to 'declare their concerns about bundled risk' and its 'linkage to mortgage debt' (Tett, 2009: 81). It is possible to also point to incremental degradation over time (across both quadrant 4 and 1), as many smart rules put in place in the 1930s, such as requiring banks to hold capital in order to offset liabilities and to maintain lower levels of leverage, were progressively dismantled or consciously not updated (Zakaria, 2009). Finally, if we are hoping for something different in the future, the reality is most U.S. government officials are products of the system that brought this grief (Hirsh, 2009).
Turning to military operations, some or all of these effects are arguably evident in a range of events. Examples include, McNamara’s recollections of the Vietnam War and mistaken focus on body count as an indicator of success (Kaplan, 2003) and the contemporary concerns in Australia over military suicides, deaths by accident, illicit drug use and abuse of power in training schools and cadet units. However, we will focus on the two cases outlined: the Children Overboard incident and the USS Vincennes.

Complex military operations require the individual to have considerable discretion. Simply, non-routine, poorly structured and unpredictable activities are not suited to prescriptive rules and procedures. However, even when prescriptive rules and procedures are identified, there are underlying tensions in task performance that range from finding an easier way to work, saving time and getting the job done, to the need to look macho and/or demonstrate prowess. There are also illusionary reasons such as, I can handle it, I can get away with it and everyone does it to cultural reasons such as, it is the way we do it here and ‘my overriding responsibility was to my ship and crew’. Another less known tension is inherent in ‘mission control’ — that delineates broad actions by a commander and allows flexibility and discretionary authority with downward delegation of decision-making (Defence, 2005). What this doctrinal statement does not identify to the layman is the potential in an overall command and control architecture (Coll, 2008) for interference from above such as was evident in the Children Overboard case. This effect, long recognized in the military, is referred to as the ‘long screwdriver’.

In sum, there are complex choices and underlying tensions. Non-compliance can be compelling if it offers an easier way to work, brings no obvious negative effects and offers immediate benefits. Conversely, it is also sometimes difficult to know the difference between innovation and error or concerned interest and manipulation. Often there are irrational factors, both internal and external, which inevitably play a role. These influences collectively can serve as catalysts for a range of behaviours and attendant intended and unintended consequences. At the risk of accusations of hindsight bias, we explore some of the tensions when policy encounters context in the two cases.

In the Children Overboard incident (Figure 3), the events central to the drama occur a long way from the actual ship and its personnel. The trigger provided by the asylum seekers boat set in play complex tensions in a politically inspired drama. In effect, public policy and related management actions at the political level played a big part in exacerbating the pressure on the leader at the sharp end. Notwithstanding unquestioned professional conduct, situational factors in Canberra and the associated mishandling and even manipulation of events as they unfolded, embroiled both junior and more senior military staff in a professionally and personally damaging debate over conflicting evidence. One can but wonder about the seeds of distrust sown for the future between the uniformed members of the Defence Forces and their political masters. In an interesting bookend to the Children Overboard incident, when another Defence minister Joel Fitzgibbon resigned in mid-2009 over a conflict of interest, he was to complain of ‘two or three Judases’ in his midst for leaking information against him.

In the case of the USS Vincennes (Figure 4), we have another complex competitive context.
that risked depersonalization and other blurred issues. In this stress-filled time-sensitive situation, there was great potential for unethical or otherwise aberrant actions (such as excess force) and unintended consequences, as was borne out by subsequent events. The immediate trigger for the unfortunate event was a commercial airliner departing innocently from a well known airport being mistaken for a hostile aircraft. This local trigger, however, intersected with pressure for mission achievement that invited unenviable tension between distinguishing right from best in intentional action and a wider politically inspired imperative that involved the U.S. in a secret war.

Thus, we argue that in this incident we saw aberrant action supported by imperfect rationality, in that the leader’s actions were most likely governed by certain cognitive biases. These biases included similarity matching rather than logic, confirmation bias with information that confirmed a viewpoint given precedence over other possibilities and loss aversion in terms of the stated need to protect the ship and its crew. There were also emotions at play, which as we noted earlier, greatly increases accessibility of thoughts related to the current need and not other thoughts.

**Supporting leaders at the sharp end**

Any call for better accountability and control ‘must be seen in terms of workplace realities’ (Collins, 2004: 125). In a competitive environment and quarter-by-quarter performance reporting, it is of course difficult to take a long (strategic) view and foster a sense of stewardship. This challenge is also not helped by excessive ‘spin’ at one end of the spectrum and institutionalized corruption at the other—witness the shift away from public responsibility as accountants went from audit watchdogs to compliant accessories in Enron and other high profile corporate losses (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Wallis, 2002). These are some of the known workplace realities, with the challenge at the sharp end not that much different to corporate level challenges in terms of complexities that can inject themselves into the equation, albeit that the involvement of emotions and biases and the impact of individual and collective behaviour and possible collusive group ethos is more obvious.

In determining how to support leaders at the sharp end, one needs to first understand the special challenges that leaders face in a time pressured and stress loaded context. Aside from the complex workplace realities of military operations, we must also consider emotions, human fallibility, cognitive biases and the often-unintended consequences that accompany many actions. Based on these considerations, three broad strategies are highlighted to build resistance against and reduce vulnerability to failure.

First, there is a need to describe and understand the ethical landscape. This landscape, as we have described it, comprises a spectrum that ranges between low level and sporadic issues to high level and endemic ones. Moreover, as Hartle (2004) warns, crossing the line can corrode the soul and warp moral sensibilities, thereby heightening the potential for unethical action as norms slowly form around perceived acceptable behaviour.

Second, there is a need to discriminate between the spectrum of risk across both individual and organizational levels. These ‘risks’ were identified in terms of cognitive biases, emotions and collective behaviour that come into play in any specific context. However, there is also an interconnection...
between individual and organizational levels, as amply demonstrated by the two military cases discussed and by the financial crisis.

Third, and finally, drawing on insights from studies in the use of hazardous technologies and safety practice, greater efforts might be directed towards the conditions under which leaders at the sharp end are expected to perform. Particular focus in this effort might be given to the countervailing forces that can increase institutional resistance or vulnerability to failure. On the strength of the cases presented, these forces include reducing the contextual complexity caused by external political machinations and moderating the effect of psychological precursors and context. Simply, if the defining property in intuitive decisions is accessibility, then widening the options in decisions made under pressure is critical to effective leadership at the sharp end.

Closing remarks

In this paper, we attempt to illustrate a systems perspective that goes beyond the means-ends instrumentalism of leader ‘ethics’. When viewed as a system, most incidents show many interconnections and an inherent complexity that together can explain why things can sometimes spiral out of control. A systems perspective requires us to understand and take into account the interdependency of conflicting goals and recognize the inevitability of unintended consequences. Consistent with this view, we suggest actions can often produce consequences that can be viewed as both good and bad, in relationships that are complex and in many cases unpredictable.

In terms of leadership, there are no easy answers. This is not new. However, highlighting the statement that leadership is a symbiotic relationship between leader and followers in a specific context, what this study emphasizes is the role that cognitive biases and group dynamics can play in a complex and interconnected activity space. These cognitive influences explain the anxiety and the underlying hidden rationality in some behaviour—as perhaps well illustrated in the case of the USS Vincennes. Group and organizational dynamics similarly generate their own tensions and unintended consequences. Some of these tensions were illustrated in the Children Overboard case.

Finally, returning to the matter of ethics and call for greater regulation, as others have remarked in regard to the financial crisis, there are necessary and reasonable regulatory actions to be taken. However, these actions are also unlikely to be sufficient to insulate the wider community from the pressure of competition and need to perform. This fact is equally applicable to other sectors of the wider community. The implication, for example, of emotionally loaded outcomes for police in the face of a raging mob or a military patrol or naval vessel when confronted by an uncertain, potentially threatening situation (aircraft travelling at speed towards a ship) seem readily apparent. At the sharp end, where many problems are as grey as the corporate world, the leader is not, however, likely to be afforded the same luxury in flexibility of choice or later accountability for his or her actions. Based on this clarity, there is usually no single cause of error and we need to instead acknowledge that (accidental) failures or (intentional) deviations are ‘multi-dimensional and multi-causal phenomena’. There are clear implications also for the content and method of public policy that must reflect the growing interdependence of all public and private activity. This is an area for future research no doubt. Based on the preceding discussion, one issue is the need for strategies to decouple activity at the sharp end from Government policy responses to emerging challenges.

Biographical notes

Keith T. Thomas moved to tertiary education in 1999 and has extensive teaching experience in under-graduate and post-graduate (MBA) programs in Australia, China and Vietnam after an earlier career in the Australian Defence
Force. He is currently the Associate Director and the Head of Evaluation Services at the Centre for Learning Enhancement and Research at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research interests include professional development, learning and teaching in higher education, and leadership. E-mail keith.thomas@cuhk.edu.hk

Allan D. Walker is Chair Professor of International Educational Leadership, Head of The Department of Education Policy and Leadership and Director of The Asia Pacific Centre for Leadership and Change, The Hong Kong Institute of Education, PRChina. Email: adwalker@ied.edu.hk

He is widely recognized scholar in educational leadership in the Asia Pacific Region. Allan has experience as a teacher, school principal, university teacher and administrator, and consultant in a range of local and international settings. He has worked in universities in Australia, Singapore and Hong Kong and conducted leader development courses and/or research in countries such as China, Taiwan, Norway, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Canada, the US, UK, New Zealand and Australia.

References


Baker A. 2009. The U.S. accepts Karzai, for Better or Worse. (Thursday, 01 October) Accessed on Saturday, 3 October 2009. Available at: http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1927403,00.html


