

Operation Tomodachi: What is the Appropriate Response of a Leader in a Crisis Situation?

The 17th Annual Mitsui USA Symposium

March 1, 2016

International Affairs Building, Columbia University



In observance of the 5th anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident triple disaster which took over 15,000 lives, the Center on Japanese Economy and Business (CJEB) at Columbia Business School (CBS), in coordination with the Mitsui USA Foundation, hosted an event on the subject of leadership which focused on “Operation Tomodachi,” the U.S. humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operation conducted in cooperation with the Government of Japan following the disaster. Paul Ingram, Kravis Professor of Business at CBS and Matthew Feely, Adjunct Assistant Professor at CBS, presented their case study on Operation Tomodachi. Professor Feely shared his experience as the then commanding officer of the U.S. Navy’s Fleet Logistics Center in Yokosuka, which is located two hundred miles southwest of the center of the earthquake.



Hugh Patrick

Professor Hugh Patrick, director of CJEB, opened the program by noting that the Japanese word *tomodachi* means “friend.” In this context, the case discussed considers a crisis situation, focusing on U.S. military decision-making for a humanitarian mission. Professor Ingram started his remarks by explaining what a teaching case is: a basis of discussion, not a work of research, as there is no empirical assertion. This case is a platform for discussing leadership under different contexts and complexities, which is increasing due to globalization and technology.

Professor Ingram gave an overview of the case, saying it considers three distinct issues. The first is the role of planning and preparation. In complex situations, one cannot foresee challenges, and therefore, leaders have to improvise; however, this does not invalidate planning, since one can prepare to improvise. Second, this case addresses how to “do the right thing” from an ethical standpoint. High stakes combined with human anxiety and fear can cause distractions from the central mission at hand. The third issue is managing “the invisible structure of the organization.” A leader must look at how its structure, social capital, information sharing trends, and other factors react in the face of complexity; this invisible structure becomes more important than basic organizational models and hierarchies in complex situations.



Paul Ingram

Professor Feely then took the stage and spoke of his personal experiences regarding the case. Before being stationed in Japan, Professor Feely had served for more than 25 years in the navy, but he had no experience with operational logistics and had never been assigned to a Pacific station, so the assignment as commanding officer to Yokosuka, the navy’s largest operational logistics provider, was a daunting task. To prepare for this assignment, (then) Captain Feely used the five months of lead time he had to conduct research on East Asia, expand and cultivate his network in the region, and study the culture and language of Japan. Further, Professor Feely reached out to “Pacific theater” experts he had known for years to help him build a set of contingency plans that might be appropriate for his future command. The process included brainstorming 30 possible contingencies with narratives describing each, and the steps needed to execute the responses. He then categorized the contingencies into seven response types that would later be formulated into training packages for the workforce. The theory was that, if the organization could execute each response type, then all imaginable contingencies would be



Matthew Feely

covered. Tsunamis, earthquakes and a commercial nuclear power disaster were all among the contingencies brainstormed; however, neither Feely nor his expert colleagues had conceived of all three disasters occurring simultaneously. Professor Feely asserted, however, that this planning gave his team a framework by which they could take the initial steps to respond appropriately – which included improvisation – starting on March 11, 2011.

Professor Feely then addressed the question of how a leader can decide the proper course of action in the face of conflicting demands when laws, regulations and rules fail to provide satisfactory guidance. He used the terms of the Anti-Deficiency Act to illustrate his dilemma. The statute forbade him from committing U.S. taxpayer monies for a relief mission without having the express permission to do so through a U.S. Congress-approved process referred to as the “requirements generation process.” Because this process is time-consuming, while the crisis required immediate action, Feely was left with a decision to either break the law – and likely be held personally liable – in order to save lives, or to follow the law and risk losing lives. He chose to save lives, despite advice to the contrary from an admiral he had known for many years.

Professor Feely asserted that one’s values should be the guiding principle in such a situation. Saving lives and property adhered to his values more than did following a law that could not possibly have envisioned the situation he faced. Shortly after making the decision, the Department of Defense provided permission to execute the mission Feely had already embarked upon, so he was no longer in danger of being prosecuted under the Anti-Deficiency Act. But the key point is that, had Feely hesitated to accept his deeply held values as the guiding light for his action – had he waited for permission to act – lives would likely have been lost.

Professor Feely then addressed the final issue brought up by the case: Professor Ingram’s notion of the “invisible structure.” Feely acknowledged the importance of the invisible structure, particularly in the case of a multi-layered organization that engages in complex operations which often require improvisation. Feely emphasized how he incorporated the invisible structure concept into his preparation for taking command and in responding to the demands of Operation Tomodachi. He recounted the

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invaluable assistance contributed by a network of experts in devising plans and training packages that ultimately helped the command to improvise when situations demanded. He described another network that he cultivated – the network of navy, Marine Corps and other defense and non-defense personnel throughout the Pacific and Indian Ocean Regions – which provided essential assistance when they were needed. This network also ensured smooth communications and synergy when operational needs required coordination among multiple organizations, which certainly was the case during Operation Tomodachi. Finally, Feely emphasized that he endeavored to ensure that his command was a “trustworthy” organization – an organization that was competent, honorable and that represented aligned values with the customer base. Building a trustworthy organization, Feely explained, was essential for transparent and fruitful cooperation and coordination within the command and with outside entities throughout the region – capacities that were at least as important as the organic capability of the organization itself.



Hugh Patrick, Paul Ingram, Matthew Feely, David E. Weinstein