

“Go to Puerto Rico and Fix it”: Define the Problem Before You Try to Solve It

Have you ever received (or issued) an order too late? Have you ever been stuck having to make a real-time decision—maybe even one that could affect the lives of your team or the life of your company?

One of my sons recently returned from his 9th tour in combat. The other fights wildfires. One is an Army Ranger and the other is a Hotshot in the Forest Service. Both of them know a thing or two about the need for sound leadership in a crisis. I spent 37 years in the Army and saw a fair number of crises myself. The three of us agree that the most important thing one can do while trying to lead others through a crisis is to clearly frame or define the problem you are trying to solve.

Every leader in the US military is intimately familiar with the Military Decision Making Process, or “MDMP”. In its simplest form, MDMP is just a problem-solving technique. The first step is always to “receive the mission.” In other words, one is prepared to be fully engaged while listening and reading the specifics of a new tasking. It’s at this point that our boss is supposed to tell us what he or she wants done, issue specific guidance, etc. In the military, that guidance usually comes in the form of orders. My experience, however, is that during a crisis, we rarely get detailed orders in time to act—they may come but will probably be too late.

In the fall of 2017, I had just finished leading the military response in support of FEMA for Hurricanes Harvey and Irma when a nasty storm named Maria devastated Puerto Rico. Another organization initially had the lead for military support to Maria’s response, but they were too small to handle the size of the response needed. So just six days after Maria’s landfall, I got a phone call from my commander who said: “Go to Puerto Rico and fix it.”

She implicitly trusted me to figure out what needed to be done to save lives and prevent further suffering but wanted to leave it up to me to figure out how to proceed. I certainly appreciated her trust and confidence, but I thought “What is it that we’re trying to fix?” I took six people with me on a military plane to the island, and on that flight I tried to frame the problem we were trying to solve. I knew that without a good understanding of the problem, our team would get busy trying to fix things, but their efforts may be wasted, or worse, harmful.

The process we used to frame the problem on that flight was simple:

- Describe the environment and conditions
- Identify observable issues and concerns
- Strive to understand what was driving or causing the concerns
- Establish linkages (if any) to better understand the root causes and their relationships
- Based on the linkages of the root causes, identify a draft of the core problem

Our core problem was that the doctrine established by the National Response Framework (NRF) that had worked so well recently in both Texas and Florida was falling apart in Puerto Rico. Those factors included finances, isolation, and expertise. Texas and Florida are two of our richest states and both have invested heavily in emergency management. In contrast, Puerto Rico was 74 Billion dollars in debt *before* the storm hit. The Governors of both Texas and Florida asked for and received help from neighboring states but Puerto Rico's air and sea ports were closed and unlike the other two states, the island was 1000 miles away from its closest US neighbor. Lastly, the emergency management agencies of both Texas and Florida were very experienced and well-resourced. That was not the case in Puerto Rico.

In Puerto Rico, the NRF was falling apart. I knew that we in the military needed to behave contrary to doctrine in order to save lives and prevent further suffering. For example, we invited all those who were using the airspace over the rural parts of the island to join us in devising a system of flight routes, corridors, and check points to prevent mid-air collisions. The FAA radars had been destroyed in the storm and we had military radars covering the airports, but there was no system to control traffic over most of the island. We had no authority to do so, but my understanding of the problem drove me to act. All those who were flying helicopters over the island including news crews, local law enforcement, the Coast Guard, the military, and even the DEA helped build the system and then used it. We did not have any accidents.

We also pushed supplies like food and water to people we thought might be in need rather than wait on requests. The system is geared to respond to requests, but given our understanding of the core problem, we knew that those with the highest need may not be able to ask for help.

Einstein once said that if he was given an hour to try to save the world, he'd spend 55 minutes studying the problem and 5 minutes solving it. Defining or framing the problem is a critical first step in successfully leading an organization through a crisis. If you get called to lead a team through a crisis, invest some time and energy to frame the problem you are trying to solve. In the end, you'll be far more successful than if you don't.