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The Art of Judgment:
An Organizational Analysis of the
New York City Fire Department,
September 11, 2001 (A Case Study)

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The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the airliner crash in Pennsylvania have placed immeasurable stress upon the victims, cleanup crews and the American people. The grief and shock caused by the events will have lasting consequences. Currently organizations are in a stage of reassessing their roles played before, during and after the crisis in order to improve responses to any possible future tragedies. Additionally affected people in organizations involved in the events are trying to overcome tremendous pain and a severe sense of loss in moving beyond the attacks and its aftermath. The focus of this paper will be on the New York Fire Department and the actions of its members in response to the attacks. Also considered are the activities of the Oklahoma City Fire Department regarding their response to the bombing of the Murrah Federal building. In particular, I will be examining specific incidents concerning judgments exercised by executives and managers in the NYFD and OCFD. The two cases afford us the opportunity to examine examples of judgments and decisions made by fire fighters on those two fateful days.

The Shocks and Initial Responses of September 11, 2001 and April 19, 1995

The crashing of the airliners into the World Trade Center buildings by the al Qaeda Network is the worst act of terrorism perpetrated on the United States, surpassing the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols in its scope and magnitude. The World Trade Center towers withstood the airline impact but eventually succumbed to the fire created by the massive amounts of jet fuel aboard the two aircraft (Glanz and Lipton 2002). McVeigh and Nichols have been convicted of various federal counts regarding the Murrah Building bombing by the use of a Ryder truck loaded with bombs made with diesel fuel and fertilizer. The events are similar, however, in that the disasters were man-made and in their wake involved the coordination of numerous government agencies in response to the tragedies. The initial reaction by fire fighters is eerily similar, though the NYFD lost a considerable number of their own and this aspect has led to a difficult time for the organization since the disaster. Additionally, the NYFD had significant problems concerning radio communications and the horrific loss of men and fire chiefs in the initial rescue efforts. Regarding the September calamity, NYFD Captain Michael Donovan told interviewers that:
It was a moment of disorienting shock. North seemed south. Left seemed right. The simple act of drawing breath became a struggle, because the air was thick with dust and black smoke from raging fires. Much of the senior command of the department, as well as many colleagues, had disappeared, either beneath the debris from the World Trade Center or in their own sprints to safety. And though the stillness was broken at times by stray bullets exploding from the heat, there were very few cries for help. "It was like after a blizzard when there's nobody out and everything is very quiet and you can't really see,"... "There was nobody. There was nobody. It was like Hiroshima after the bomb" (Flynn and Dwyer 2002).

Donovan's comments were echoed by others, including the Deputy Assistant Fire Chief of Fire Safety, Albert Turi, who came across the Brooklyn bridge in time to see the north tower collapse:

"I knew right from the start that there was no way this Fire Department could extinguish six or eight floors of fire, fully involved, in a high-rise building," Chief Turi said. "It's just not possible, because we don't have the means to do it."

Just entering the building had lethal risks: the debris and bodies falling from the upper floors were killing people on the ground (Dwyer 2002).

The chaotic conditions that the Oklahoma City Fire Department encountered are well described by Assistant Fire Chief Jon Hansen:

Twenty-two years in the fire service will teach you to be ready for anything. But on April 19, 1995, I learned there are some things you can never be completely ready to face. You can be prepared and that helps but you can never totally be ready for a disaster of this magnitude.... No one waited for the alarm that we knew was coming. Instinct kicked in immediately... As my car topped Fifth and Walker, I was stunned to see the chaos in front of me.... There was dense black smoke everywhere. A thick cloud of brown dust hung in the air. Bricks and debris filled the street.... Dozens of dazed people wandered the streets, many with blood streaming down their faces. People were running—some running for help while others were running to help. Paper rained from the sky (Hansen 1995, 7-9; Garrett 1996, 35). [Italics added for emphasis]

One can readily see the shocking situations faced by Captain Donovan, Chief Turi and Chief Hansen in their attempts to manage the crisis events. The initial surprise of both infamous episodes brought about similar circumstances in which managers and their workers had to deal with phenomena well beyond the normal day-to-day activities. The terrorist attacks tested the organizations to their limits. Subsequent to the events of the Oklahoma City case, the National Fire Protective Association (NFPA) gave the OCFD generally high marks for the behavior of members of the organization, though there were problems involving radio communications and some logistical failures (1995). The NFPA no longer evaluates fire departments in the manner they did in 1995. A thorough comprehensive analysis of the NYFD has yet to be completed. We will explore specific incidents in the two fire organizations below and how they respond to internal political issues arising from the tragic events.

Organizational Conflict in the New York Fire Department after September 11

An important aspect of healing is making an attempt to make some sense of what we (the public and those people directly affected) can in understanding how we might improve our collective response to terrorist attacks and other calamities. By nearly all accounts, the New York City fire and police
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department's acquitted themselves well in saving the lives of many people, although there has been
some criticism as to what failures might be averted in the future in the event that some similar
catastrophe may occur. In this vein, the New York Fire Department, through Fire Commissioner
Nicholas Scoppetta, has undertaken an initiative to get private organizational consultants to analyze
how the NYFD responded to the events of September 11 and to do the job without pay (Lueck 2002).
Not all of members of the NYFD have the same desire and feelings concerning actions that might be
taken in order to come to a final conclusion regarding the department’s response to events on
September 11. This last point is illustrated by the following exchange between Commissioner
Scoppetta and Captain Peter Gorman, president of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association.
Commissioner Scoppetta wants to review the actions of the fire fighters on the fateful day in order to
correct or eliminate possible errors in the future. On this matter, the Commissioner stated “This isn’t
about finding fault, it’s about figuring out what happened and how best to prepare for a major
emergency in the future.... We want to give all this information to someone who will do a credible,
comprehensive review.” Whereas, Captain Gorman indicated to reporters that “the interviews [of the
firemen and chiefs] had initially been described [by the NYFD hierarchy]...as historical
documentation” and that “the fact they had become both public and a part of a normal investigation
amounted to a betrayal” (Flynn and Dwyer 2002). The exchange between the Commissioner and the
leader of the Uniformed Officers Association illustrates the tension that exists between executives and
managers in modern organizations. Executives (i.e., the Commissioner) live in a life-world with
different expectations and responsibilities. Managers (i.e., the Captain), who operate with different
assumptions in the organization, have to take orders from executives further away from the actual
work, in this case the search and rescue operation and clean-up of the World Trade Center area in the

The existence of differences between levels in organizations is exacerbated during times of crisis or
when there are absolute and irreconcilable positions taken on a problem. This tension between the
executive and manager levels in an organization is characteristic of problems inherent in the
knowledge analytic and is accentuated during times of stress in modern organizations (Carnevale and
Hummel 1996; Garrett 2001). The main problem for today’s organizations is the ubiquity of hierarchy
as described below:

[The] turning of the head upward also makes me dependent not only of the superior
knowledge of technical task division and coordination possessed by my superior—it also
makes me dependent on that superior in a personal political way. If that superior
chooses to tell me to do things that express his or her personal self-interest rather than the
requirements for scientific task design or technical task coordination, I am no longer in a
position to know or judge whether such demands are technical or political.

The potential for political misuse of technical working together on a job also means the
breaking apart of politically working together. Technically divided labor also surrenders
political judgment....(Hummel 1994, 236).

The conflict depicted above regarding the different organizational interpretations of what ought to be
done regarding the investigation of the events of September 11 illustrate the political conflict inherent
to hierarchy. On the one hand there is the Commissioner attempting to get a report finding potential
culpability for (mis)management of organizational resources and apparently using surreptitious means
to obtain information. On the other hand, the Captain is suspicious of the motives of the
Commissioner regarding his intentions for the information obtained by interviewing fire chiefs and
their men done ostensibly for “historical documentation.” The verdict is out as to which version is
true, but the conflict reveals the inherent problems found in modern organizations.
Organizational Conflict and Resolution after April 19

The response by the Oklahoma City Fire Department, though positively evaluated by analysts and critics, had a number of problems as part of its legacy. Critical here and somewhat analogous to the NYFD issue involving trust between the executive, management, and worker levels, was the problem of what to do with the fire fighters and officers on the scene who refused to obey organizational rules. In particular, after the bomb had exploded at 9:02 a.m. and the various agencies began to arrive at the scene of the disaster, a second bomb threat had been called in by what turned out to be a crank caller at approximately 10:00 the same morning. According to the rulebook, fire fighters are supposed to leave their victims at the scene in order not to become casualties themselves. Several of the crews decided not to leave and stayed behind to extricate the victims from the rubble of the Murrah building and had disobeyed the rules. The dilemma for the organization was recounted below by Chief Hansen:

The decision to pull out our people was made quickly. In truth, there was no choice to make. The first rule for those responding to an emergency is not to become victims themselves. However, getting everyone to comply was not as simple as giving the order to vacate the premises. First, we had the logistical problem of getting word to rescue workers.... We learned later that some of those rescuers opted to stay with the injured and ride out the threat. We didn't reprimand any of them for their decision. We felt it was one of those few times in life where there wasn't a right choice.... (Hansen 1995, 18-19; Garrett 1996, 37).

We see here that when faced with the conflict between set organizational rules and the ethical/moral dimensions of the managers and workers, common sense should prevail. The decision made by the senior leadership of the Oklahoma City Fire Department not to use punitive measures for those fire fighters who had violated the rules resulted in a reconsideration of organizational policies. Executives and managers believed that nothing was to be gained by putting sanctions on the fire fighters who had clearly done everything possible as human beings to do their work as best they could.

A Brief Comparison of the Incidents Involving the Two Cases

The two cases illustrate well a common problem in modern organizations: who in the organization has the best perspective as to how the agency should be run. In Western society, it is automatically assumed that those at the top of the organization are best suited to perform this organizational role. Due to the rigid nature of most human organizations the hierarchical model prevails. The language in personnel manuals generally dictates specific prescriptions for members' organizational behavior. Science is added to the cause of aiding management in conforming members into being systematic machine-like tools. Executives and managers in modern organizations have a tendency to be rule bound and favor improved scientific techniques for control. The philosopher Alfred Shutz warns of the errors of applying what passes for science upon society:

...All social sciences are objective meaning-contexts of subjective meaning-contexts.... All scientific knowledge of the social world is indirect. It is knowledge of the world of contemporaries and the world of predecessors, never of the world of immediate social reality. Accordingly, the social sciences can understand man in his everyday social life not as a living individual person with a unique consciousness, but only as a personal ideal type without duration or spontaneity. They can understand him only as existing within an impersonal and anonymous objective time which no one ever has, or ever can,
experience. To this ideal type are assigned only such conscious experiences as are required to accompany motives already formally postulated (Shutz 1967, 241).

The danger of prescribing too much into the behavior of complex human beings cannot be underestimated. Hummel, following the philosopher Edmund Husserl, states that "bureaucracy models reality and becomes, in time, preoccupied with procedure" (1994, 213). Hummel further adds that "true managers" really manage and behave with the best of intentions for their workers and the public when they use their brains to deal with the non-routine (1994, 213).

Examining the two case studies, we can now see more clearly the problems in the organizations. Judgments had to be made regarding the chaos that was created in the early stages of both disasters. The fire chiefs and other fire fighters had to make decisions that involved the potential for losing lives, including their own. This is nothing particularly unusual given the work that they do. However, in both cases the calamities were unprecedented. All involved had to be Hummel's true managers in dealing with matters that were definitely non-routine, and this aspect involves the application of judgment. Sir Geoffrey Vickers' "appreciative systems" theory is instructive here though it is not to be confused with technical-rational scientific theories (1995).

Vickers' typology breaks judgment into three primary areas: (1) Reality judgments—based on what is and has been; (2) Value judgments—the selection of the "facts" that are to be observed and regulated; and, (3) Instrumental judgments—or "what are we going to do?" (1995, 54, 103 and 114). We see from these two case studies variation in all three subsets of Vickers' judgments. In the September 11 NYFD episode, questions as to what occurred are accentuated between those who were actually there (the fire fighters and fire chiefs) and the executives who were not directly involved in the event, such as Commissioner Scoppetta. Explanations offered by the fire fighters were insufficient and outside organizational consultants have been called for in order to get to the bottom of the perceived inadequate initial response. What "facts" that are to be observed and regulated remain a mystery to Captain Gorman and the other uniformed officers. The question persists as to what are the important facts that will be emphasized in an organizational analysis after the events of September 11. This aspect has led Gorman and the other officers in the NYFD to conclude that the upper reaches of the organizational hierarchy have ulterior motives, especially after obtaining the stories and reports from the fire fighters. The instrumental judgment aspect of "what are we going to do?" contributes to unease in the situation. Also, the question remains as to whether specific organizational procedures were followed or violated and what to do (if anything) following any final report given to the Commissioners by organizational consultants. Hummel's criticism of bureaucracy manifests itself here as the dependency on the superior (the Commissioner) leaves the Captain in the position to not know if he is to judge whether the demands placed on him and his fellow officers in the NYFD are political or technical.

The OCFD handled the conflict between those who stayed with the victims during the second bomb scare and those who left. Organizational rules had been violated, however, personal judgments were made and the fire fighters who made them were not admonished by the upper management. There was ultimately a consensus by all participants as to what occurred, although there was not total agreement as to what the punishment ought to be. Using Vickers' appreciative systems we see that the reality judgment and value judgment aspects were readily agreed upon intersubjectively by the fire fighters, chiefs, and outside evaluators. The OCFD as a human system demonstrates that a consensus is lacking in the instrumental judgment aspect. Some animosity exists in the organization and will for as long as members hold to their personal judgments concerning the events of April 19, 1995.
Conclusion

These two case studies demonstrate the importance of judgment on organizational decision-making. Hummel (1991) has made the case that stories managers tell are as valid as science. We see in these two cases the importance of judgments made by the fire fighters through their stories. A question concerning trust remains as to how the NYFD Commissioner will use the internal interviews generated by the organization. The NYFD officers have raised the issue and believe they have been betrayed. The fact that there is internal political conflict within organizations is well known by any student or practitioner in public administration. Crisis events such as those that occurred on September 11, 2001 and April 19, 1995 well illustrate the tensions that are inherent to human organizations. Executives, managers and other organizational participants render judgments. Whether those at the lower end of the hierarchy are truly heard in the expression of their angst when problems arise is a key problem in management. The application of science by the top of the hierarchy to lower-level participants can be damaging to organizational members if applied without regard to circumstances surrounding social reality.

References


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Endnotes

1 Previously I have conducted phone interviews and mail correspondence with Chief Fire Investigator Ed Comeau after the Oklahoma City bombing. I have been told by the public information office in Quincy, Massachusetts that the NFPA was not going to analyze the NYFD in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001.

2 See Garrett 1996 for a more thorough explanation and elaboration of the activities of the Oklahoma City Fire Department after the Murrah Federal Building bombing.

3 This is not to say that tensions have been completely resolved after this incident. Conversations that I had with a fire engineer who worked closely with the OCFD during the disaster recovery phase indicated that there was conflict within the organization after the decision not to punish those workers who stayed with the victims. Those who left after the bomb scare and returned later believed they were right in following the rules and resented the others who had stayed behind. Guilt from both groups is part of the traumatic legacy of dealing with such a complicated and extraordinary incident.

4 Further elaboration is in order here. Science should not be completely pre-empted in all instances but should be considered as one of several alternatives. A dynamic way to consider an element of the objective-subjective dimension of philosophical and scientific inquiry and to examine the temporal-spatial (natural world) is to use the "action-time" matrix developed by Bensman and Lilienfeld (1991):

**Figure 1: Action - Time Matrix** (From Bensman and Lilienfeld 1991, 25):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rationally</td>
<td>Objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calculated</td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Sense</td>
<td>Ritualistic and Ceremony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationality</td>
<td>Attitude of Everyday Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Time and action are the crucial elements in our understanding of complex situations. Bensman and Lilienfeld (1991, 16-7), following the philosopher Alfred Shutz, demonstrate that scientific attitude and attitude of everyday life represent different conceptions of time interpretation as "In the scientific attitude, time is measured in the objective sense of the term with standardized units, independently of a feeling of involvement [or rational detachment] which increases or decreases the experience of passing time." In the attitude of everyday life, "actions are situationally egocentric in the same sense that psychological time is temporally egocentric" (Bensman and Lilienfeld 1991, 16). The planning attitude incorporates the scientific and natural attitudes and reflects "an unselfconscious, nonreflective man who directly and immediately enters into social relations with others in terms of his immediate personal goals and his direct and intuitive apprehension of a situation" (17). The ritualistic and ceremonial action cell "suggests ritual and ceremony as means of organizing activity, especially in highly stylized or expressive ways [alternatives are not considered]" (18). Time is important for our understanding of the context in which decision makers in these case studies took action (made decisions) and under what conditions the decisions were made. The managers and workers of the Oklahoma City and New York Fire Departments at the time immediately after the bombing were in the "action" and "time" dimension of the "attitude of everyday life." Of course, when managers have the "time," they can, and often do, engage in strategic planning and training to attempt to cope with day-to-day actions. They cannot, however, plan for every possible contingency, as these case studies illustrate. Rational science has difficulty responding to the "attitude of everyday life" dimension when a crisis management situation
occurs. But managers have to deal with these crises, nonetheless, rendering judgments on the scene within limited time and space constraints.


Many of the early systems theorists quickly became focused on the notion of a general systems theory, which could apply equally to all forms of systems—natural, mechanical, and human. In keeping with the modern epistemological dominance of technical rationality, such theories were usually cast in terms of those systems that could be most fully described and executed technically. The concomitant developments in computers and artificial intelligence, along with the emergence of sophisticated management information systems, further intensified this bent in systems thinking. In many quarters, theorizing was reduced to technical modeling and thus became increasingly inimical to the examination of processes such as human judgment, which, due to their tacit elements, unfailingly resisted capture in wholly explicit and analytic schemes (xviii).

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