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Symposium
Introduction

Making Boston Strong: Social Capital, Collaboration, and Accountability Lessons for Public Administrators in the Twenty-First Century

The Boston Marathon bombings need little introduction. Although small in comparison with the terrorist attacks of September 11, this will likely be one of those events that many Americans will recall with much clarity years from now. On Patriot's Day, April 15, 2013, two improvised explosive devices, allegedly created and detonated by two extremists, exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon in the heart of the city. The blasts killed three and injured more than 260, immediately setting off an extensive and unprecedented health, public safety, and social service response involving myriad public and nonprofit agencies. From a public administration standpoint, the attacks and the subsequent response, coming nearly a dozen years after 9/11, prompt us to reflect on and evaluate the coordination of the response, lessons learned since 9/11, and the implications for public administration today.

This symposium contributes to that conversation, providing a practitioner's perspective and two research articles. Ed Davis, the Boston police commissioner at the time of the bombings and one of the most prominent figures in the crisis, shares his insights on policing and the importance of deliberate collaboration in his Perspective essay. The two research articles that follow examine the same event, highlighting critical themes in public administration but in very different ways. Qian Hu, Claire Connolly Knox, and Naim Kapucu focus on the specific actions and interactions among various actors involved with the response, while John Marvel uses the case as a backdrop for a study investigating the impact of blame attributions on citizens' perceptions.

Although questions remain about international communication and collaboration weaknesses that could have prevented the attack, the multiagency response to the attacks has garnered significant praise. Ongoing collaboration across many community agencies, during both preparedness and response efforts, likely facilitated a more effective communication and coordination scenario, minimizing the number of deaths

and leading to a relatively fast capture of the suspects. In public administration research and education, we dedicate much of our work to learning from mistakes, but lessons also lie within success stories. Symposia such as this allow practitioners and researchers to understand what happened, and possibly why, for future efforts.

The events of 9/11 identified extensive weaknesses in interagency collaboration and led to major changes in homeland security policy and practice. The Boston Marathon bombings give us the opportunity to reflect on such changes, evaluate the collaborative efforts in a new crisis, and identify current challenges for public administrators. This case is particularly relevant to the national security conversation, as the event represents a complex planning and implementation effort. Collaboration is an integral part of the Boston Marathon every year, with a course that stretches across multiple municipalities, warrants the opening of Boston's Medical Intelligence Center, and requires the resources and energies of many public safety, health, and other organizations spanning the sectors. The events of the 2013 Boston Marathon highlight the value of the extensive preparation, coordination, and communication plans linking public health, safety, and related agencies in the greater Boston area.

Leading Collaboratively: In Search of a Model That Works

The collaboration imperative has been traced back to our founders (Bingham and O'Leary 2011), and the importance of managing across boundaries has been recognized for most of the last century, but networks and collaborative management have resulted in new structural arrangements in more recent years, necessitated in part by the speed and complexity of the information age (Agranoff and McGuire 2003). One of the most significant shifts in contemporary public management has been the recognition that public managers must anticipate managing beyond the confines of a hierarchical bureaucracy: "In the twenty-first century, interdependence and the salience

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of information have resulted in an environment where organizational and sectoral boundaries are more conceptual than actual, and collaborative managerial responses are required to complement, and in some cases even displace, bureaucratic processes” (Agranoff and McGuire 2004, 2). The crisis and emergency management literature identifies collaboration as an inherent aspect of the field. Traditional bureaucratic arrangements are insufficient for tackling complex crises. The Boston Marathon bombings illustrate this clearly, requiring effective collaboration among myriad agencies, most notably, health and public safety, across levels of government.

Social capital and communication are important elements of effective collaborations (O’Leary and Vij 2012), but this can be problematic in times of crisis, when managers are often up against a clock under unforeseen circumstances. Ideally, social capital, trust, and communication channels are developed prior to the crisis, but we cannot always anticipate such crises. Fortunately, the Boston community recognized the potential for just such an attack and had already built social capital and trust among agencies prior to the event. In fact, Boston has been long recognized as a model for collaboratively tackling complex community threats and challenges, particularly around public safety (Braga et al. 2001). Some may see this as a fortunate circumstance; others could argue that such foresight is a critical skill for public managers, fitting with Comfort’s (2007) discussion of cognition as an important aspect of crisis management. Not all crises can be foreseen, but regular consideration of the risks facing a community is an important responsibility of public administrators and a valuable lesson from the Boston Marathon bombings.

As Comfort explains, control is a necessary component of effective crisis management, but it varies from its hierarchical connotations in the context of crisis management: “In the dynamic, uncertain environment of disaster operations, control means, rather, the capacity to keep actions focused on the shared goal of protecting lives, property, and maintaining continuity of operations” (2007, 195). Accountability remains important in the context of crisis management, but crisis situations can pose a significant challenge for balancing accountability and agility (Comfort 2007). Networks result in new approaches and challenges for maintaining control and accountability. There is a need for more empirical inquiry to understand how collaborative networks, in Boston and elsewhere, lay the foundation for their response to such situations. The Boston case illustrates that leadership, in and of itself, does not explain the effective response. Rather, Boston’s implementation of collaborative leadership across organizational boundaries, putting aside hierarchical bureaucracies, was critical to a successful response.

Boston Lessons

In his essay “Decades of Preparation, but Only Moments to Respond: How Authentic Collaboration Saves Lives and Solves Problems,” Ed Davis, police commissioner during the Boston Marathon events and an internationally recognized police leader, reflects on his career, singling out his transformation from a reactive manager to a community-focused leader who believes in prevention, partnerships, and problem solving. He highlights the importance of collaboration, acknowledges its challenges, and identifies its antecedents—including transparency, a community-centric focus, mutual respect, and a shared history of partnership. It is fitting that

Davis begins by discussing a turning point from more than 20 years ago in his reflections on the Boston Marathon attacks. Although crises may appear suddenly, with no warning, effective crisis management depends on leadership and partnerships across a variety of diverse sectors, which may take years to cultivate.

In “What Have We Learned since September 11, 2011? A Network Study of the Boston Marathon Bombings Response,” Qian Hu, Claire Connolly Knox, and Naim Kapucu evaluate the effectiveness of interagency coordination, comparing planned disaster networks with the actual response to the Boston Marathon bombings. They examine an extensive network of 138 organizations involved with the initial response and recovery effort, representing public, business, and nonprofit sectors. The authors find that the whole community approach to emergency management, the strength of existing networks, and an integrated communication infrastructure contributed to the success of the collaborative efforts in response to this crisis. In short, the Boston Marathon response demonstrated more systematic and coordinated cross-sector collaboration than the public response to 9/11.

The Boston Marathon bombings remind us of the critical role that public agencies and officials play in the lives of citizens. Although much of this occurs out of sight and unknown to the average citizen, events such as this throw a spotlight on public service, often creating heroes and villains out of public officials and administrators. In “The Boston Marathon Bombings: Who’s to Blame and Why It Matters for Public Administration,” John Marvel investigates the role of blame, specifically, the influence of statements by public administrators and politicians on citizens’ perceptions of fault. He finds that public managers are perceived as more competent and trustworthy than politicians overall, but party identification and the subject of the blame statement do play a role. His research asserts the importance of managing citizens’ expectations, which may be both more important and more difficult during times of crisis. We cannot control such expectations, which are going to be influenced by the media and other factors, but we can make an effort to help shape expectations for the public good.

The articles presented are quite distinct, but similar themes emerge throughout this symposium. Most notably, the Perspective essay and the two research articles relate to the importance of social capital and trust for emergency management. Responders and citizens both need and expect collaboration in crises, which further highlights the importance of relationship building on an ongoing basis. Davis credits years of collaboration entwined with planning and a community focus as major contributors to the lives saved that day and to the success of the investigation. Hu, Knox, and Kapucu provide empirical support, finding that extensive preparation and well-coordinated networks contributed to the effectiveness of the response. Marvel’s study demonstrates that expertise is an important condition for public trust. We do not always have a choice as to whether to respond with a hierarchical or networked structure in public administration anymore, as crisis situations demand collaboration when they reach beyond the capacity or expertise of any one organization.

The two research articles also recognize that crises may be catalysts for reform, although the effectiveness of reform under such

conditions is still up for debate. Hu, Knox, and Kapucu suggest that 9/11 was a “focusing event” for policy and institutional changes, leading to significant improvements in Boston emergency preparedness and coordination. Marvel’s study fits more closely with Boin and ’t Hart’s assertion that crisis management is not well suited to effective reform, in part because of political pressures on crisis leaders, public desire to hold someone accountable, and tensions between the “imperatives of effective crisis containment” and the “imperatives of reform craft” (2003, 549). Marvel raises a similar concern that responses to crises may be politically driven in the context of “malleable” blame perceptions, crowding out public administration concerns.

Conclusion

This symposium gives us the opportunity to reflect on lessons learned since 9/11, build on the network and collaboration literatures, and consider remaining gaps to be addressed. The Boston case highlights the complexity of crisis management today, which also has significant implications for understanding interagency communication and coordination, measuring success, and training public administrators.

Generalizing from the Boston case is inappropriate for several reasons. The health and public safety capacity and social capital features associated with a prominent and long-standing event, combined with the communication and coordination infrastructure in Boston, may be rare. Yet it is these very characteristics that provide

public managers with insightful lessons about communication and collaboration, demonstrating that the changes recommended since 9/11 for local capacity building and a whole community approach to emergency management have occurred, likely saving many lives on April 15, 2013.

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