

## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

# Leadership in a Crisis

Jay Silveria, Lieutenant General, USAF, United States Air Force Academy

**Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay**

**Lindsay:** Would you mind giving a few reflections on what the last few months have been like as a commander and as a leader.

**Silveria:** One of the things that is interesting to me about the last few months is that some of it is very familiar and some of it is decidedly unfamiliar. I'll give you some examples. From my previous position as the deputy air component commander, the idea of working through and working in uncertainty was a normal course of doing business. We had intelligence, but no matter what you had, you knew it wasn't perfect. You knew that there was something missing that you didn't know. Regardless of every planning effort, something was going to go wrong, somebody was going to make a human mistake, or on an aircraft, something was going to break. Let's not forget that the weather gets a vote and the enemy gets a vote. So, that level of uncertainty was a very familiar feeling. As the COVID-19 pandemic started to develop we began to see what it was going to look like, and everyone was dealing with the uncertainty. That feeling was familiar. It was familiar enough that I knew some of the things that had to happen and I knew some of the things that I needed to do. One of those is the ability to simplify things. Others were to continue to communicate and look out for each other. These thoughts were included in the email I wrote to our Academy community several weeks ago about dealing with uncertainty, because those steps were familiar to me.

But, some things drifted in there that were so unfamiliar. The biggest one that I had not dealt with, was the idea that with this kind of "enemy", this virus, were the individuals involved who were at risk. For members of the military, it is what we sign up for. We are used to taking risks, and we are used to being asked to take risks to

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execute a mission. That is a normal thing. But, at no time have I ever been asked to risk my family. We were asking individuals to risk their families because if they were interacting with us or each other, and at work, they were introducing risk to themselves. Then, when they went home, they were introducing risk at home. That was an element that really hit me in the beginning about how decidedly different this situation is. I was used to asking people to take risks, but asking them to take risks with their families, that was very, very different right in the beginning. So, the uncertainty was familiar, but that portion regarding the families was not.

I still see the remnants of those beginnings today. Everybody is wondering, “What are we doing this summer?” “What is the schedule going to be in August?” So many people are looking for a date – a date like October 8th or January 18th – where we are through this and done with this, where everything can go back to where it was about four months ago in the middle of January. It is so pervasive where everyone is looking to flatten the curve and wonder – when is the end? The reality is that it is becoming clear that we are going to be in this for a very long time and there is no end date. That uncertainty makes everyone so uncomfortable. There is also an important point that I was reminded of in the past two months. It is important for a leader to grieve quickly and then get through that grief and be ready to lead. Bad things just happen. However, when something bad happens, a leader is allowed about a half a second to go, “That is awful.” The leader has to get through the stages of grief quickly because if they start dwelling on that grief, or dwelling on how horrible it is, the dwell in that grief is bad for an organization. I recently put out a message to our team about recognizing that the situation is bad, but let’s find the opportunity. A leader, when something bad happens, needs to grieve quickly and be ready to step out in uncertain times.

**Lindsay:** That’s an important point. If the pause is too long, then it can be seen as hesitation or a lack of confidence. It can be interpreted in many different ways by people. However, that ability to frame it as an opportunity is key. We can’t control that it happened, but we can shape what happens from there on out. What can we do out of that moment that is going to improve the final end state even if we don’t know the exact timeline?

**Silveria:** That was exactly the point that I was trying to make. It is so common to hear, in normal times, that we are so busy and there is so much to do. As it stands now, everything is cancelled. We are the ones that will be putting things back on the schedule. If we think it is too much, needs to be reformed, or needs to be changed or resourced differently, and we just place it back on the schedule...then shame on us. We need to take the opportunity to review if we are spending too much time on this or that. Maybe we are spending too much energy on something versus the return we are getting. Maybe we can combine two things and we will get more of a focus and outcome as an institution. We have such an opportunity. In the past, everyone was telling us that we have to have this, we have to have that, and this thing happens every year. Well, they didn’t happen this time and somehow we managed to survive. If they didn’t happen, then let’s take the chance to decide what we put back and how we put it back. That is the opportunity here.

I also remember, years back, in survival school. When you are in a group survival situation, one of the important things to do is hand out jobs. Get everyone involved, engaged, and looking forward. That was the point of one of my messages several weeks ago, that one of the things to do in a crisis is to start planning alternatives. That is a way of engaging. President Eisenhower said, “Plans are nothing; planning is everything.” Because the process that the organization goes through, and what the leader goes through when

you are planning, is the actual good part of it. That is where the learning and development takes place. I think that is so applicable to the place that we have found ourselves over the past couple of months. We need to have everyone engaged and thinking, planning, and looking at alternatives.

**Lindsay:** Absolutely. What we know about human development is that development generally doesn't occur when we are comfortable. This disruption that has occurred can serve as a catalyst for development and how we think about development. To your point, you are a graduate, and as a graduate myself, we are anchored in some way in our experience, and what occurred to us and what we went through. If you factor in the idea of innovation, of which you have been

opportunity. You are right, the idea that you have to do this and that on a particular day because that is what we did and those before us did it as well. I think there is an opportunity for us to take a different look.

**Lindsay:** Right, and that doesn't mean everything has to change, but we can certainly be intentional about it. I wanted to go back to something you said earlier. You talked about being in a crisis situation and it feeling a bit familiar. You have seen that at the upper levels based on your experience. However, many people in the organization haven't been witness to that. How have you, as a leader, tried to convey that familiarity and confidence that we need to plan through to the institution?

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a champion for during your time as Superintendent, we can think about processes in a new way that we may not have been able to before. If we are able to opt things back onto the schedule, then we are able to ask some questions about how and when we do things that was not possible before.

**Silveria:** Exactly, because it was on the script and the calendar. It said on this day, this is going to happen. I think we can take an opportunity in a number of ways. We can take a resourcing view of something. We can take a timing look at something. I think it is such an

**Silveria:** I think that is a really interesting question because some of the things that have happened, I know what to do because it has happened to me before. But I didn't know what to do in a COVID-19 environment where you can't bring everyone together and you can't communicate in the same way. I think that has been a challenge for a lot of people, including me, to adapt to the communication model that we have to work with. After we are done talking today I am going to do a live broadcast online, the Superintendent's weekly live-stream update.

I have done plenty of all calls, but the idea that I am broadcasting to over 3-4 thousand people and getting comfortable with that type of communication, has been a challenge. However, I think that in a crisis situation, it is so important that a leader continues to communicate. Not just results and directions, but it is also what we are thinking and what are the challenges? So, I have tried to convey, "Here is one of the challenges we have for the summer", or "Here is one of the things we are thinking about." Not to come up with a solution, but to convey the facts of what the challenges are and what we are thinking about to the organization. To show the complexity of what we are dealing with.

There is a framework, called the Cynefin Framework<sup>1</sup>. It looks at how you make decisions based on a scale of complexity. For example, if you have more chaos, then you generally will just react and make a decision. However, when there is less chaos, and a lower level of complexity, then you can take in more information and consider more alternatives. So, you can ask, “Where are you?” on the scale as the complexity moves. I think the key in crisis leadership is that communication piece. COVID-19 has made it that much more challenging to communicate when you can’t just bring everyone together. I am comfortable talking in front of a group. But, when you are speaking to a group when all you are doing is talking into a microphone and there is no feedback from the audience - that is a challenge. Nobody is laughing...nobody is turning and talking to someone...no one is going quiet when you are trying to make a point. All of those are types of feedback. Without that feedback, you are just talking. So, that has been a challenge.

**Lindsay:** You mentioned several things there that get highlighted in a crisis situation and are really important to effective leadership, like communication and being visible. One of the things that has stood out with the current situation, is the ability to hear from and see senior leaders directly through things like your broadcasts. Often, in normal circumstances, there isn’t always that opportunity. To be able to see (via video technology) leaders of the organization talking about what you just mentioned, has been very important. It allows the organization to see leadership being available, transparent and open about what is going on, and taking the time to communicate that.

**Silveria:** For me, that is important. That is why I do the Thursday afternoon all calls. I think it is okay for

a leader to say that we are still taking in information and working through part of it. To say, here are the things that I am thinking about. I will get you an answer later and that we are considering options. One of the things that has been reaffirmed for me through this as a leader in this setting, is that you can’t assume there is just one way to communicate that is going to work. We do weekly broadcasts, emails, social media, public affairs releases, and more. Added to this, the audience we are communicating to is multi-generational and it is also multi-faceted in their domain knowledge and experience. As a result, I think it is going to be important to continue to communicate in different mediums and different ways. I knew that, but the current environment has made that even more obvious. As an example, someone will say, “There wasn’t anything new in the email that you sent or in the broadcast.” And at the same time, someone else will say, “Thanks for that. I really learned something.” So, that shows the importance of the combination of approaches to communication.

**Lindsay:** To make it even more complex, you also have multiple constituencies as well. Cadets, faculty, staff, the graduate community, the community of Colorado Springs, to name several. For example, it has been great to see the graduate community step in and support so strongly.

**Silveria:** I have truly enjoyed watching the graduate community step up and step in. To ask questions and get engaged. Watching the support they give and their support to the Class of 2020 through all of this. All of a sudden, the emails, letters and cards started pouring in. They were asking what they can do to help or just give a note of support.

I do have to remind myself constantly, that every time I speak or we speak as an institution, I might intend it for a certain audience, but it is going everywhere. It

<sup>1</sup> The Cynefin framework was developed by David Snowden in 1999 and was first published in the Harvard Business Review in 2007 (<https://hbr.org/2007/11/a-leaders-framework-for-decision-making>)

goes to the graduates, the people who work here, cadets, the cadet's parents, the Air Staff, and Congress. When we communicate, it goes absolutely everywhere.

**Lindsay:** And instantly everywhere.

**Silveria:** Yes. One of the things that has surprised me is that reach. I was contacted by the person who does the parent engagements. She came in to tell me that several of the parents got the link to our Teams broadcast and were sharing it around to a lot of other parents so they could listen in. We are aware enough that we wouldn't say anything that we didn't want anyone to hear. But, think about that for a minute. This is an invite to a meeting for members in the organization. Where else would you have someone attending a meeting and just join in because they wanted to see what was going on? That is not normal business practice where anyone who wants to show up can attend any meeting or a board meeting. If the meeting was in a conference room, people don't just show up. But, in the virtual world, it is accepted and people just show up. It is an interesting dynamic.

**Lindsay:** That is an interesting point about virtual dynamics, because I remember back to one of your broadcasts two or three weeks ago, you called out some inappropriate comments a few people made in the chat for the meeting. There is an anonymity where people feel empowered to say inappropriate things that they wouldn't say otherwise because it is a virtual situation. It is fascinating to me.

**Silveria:** You are right. It is fascinating why it is okay to be rude or obnoxious to a senior member of the organization because you are anonymous. I don't know where they were from or even if they were a part of the organization. But, I called them out because of that. You probably don't know this, but I received four responses back from people apologizing for that. They were anonymous, but they said, "That was me, and I apologize." It's a good indicator that they replied, but

why is that okay? Why, if you have an unrecognizable name, you can hide in that anonymity and make an obnoxious comment? Unfortunately, we see that in social media all the time.

**Lindsay:** As a commander, I know you have given enough speeches, where I am sure you have delivered a message that was received in a less than favorable way and the receivers of that message may have had negative thoughts. But, there is a distinct difference between thinking that negativity and actually typing it out and sending it in a public venue. I think that speaks directly to the complexity of leadership in the current environment or in crisis situations.

**Silveria:** I think it is so different when someone isn't accountable for their words. So, they feel like they are not accountable which allows them to consider an extreme position due to that lack of accountability. Whereas, if their name is there, they are accountable for their words. I think that has been really interesting. I think that gets to what we talked about before – the fear. Because there is a fear component to the COVID-19 situation that is present. I mentioned earlier about families. There is a fear component that comes with that, and that fear component is different for someone who is an active duty combatant versus an Assistant Professor in the Math Department who is a civilian. They didn't sign up for fear. They signed up for Math. I think that component adds something different to this current situation. I also think that there is a huge temptation in leadership in bad situations for the leader to come out as disingenuous or understating the severity of the situation. This situation is bad. There are people dying. Over 900 people have died in Colorado. A leader that says we will take on this challenge and work on this together, is one thing. However, for some leaders there is a temptation to say, "Well, this isn't so bad. We have only had a few cases of people who got sick. So, you have nothing to be worried about. Don't be afraid." When people are actually afraid. You have to acknowledge that fear. You have to be able to say,

“Yes, you are right. This is bad. Here is how we are going to mitigate it. Here is how we are going to work through it.” To dismiss that emotion, or dismiss that concern, it is tempting, but I think it is very dangerous. Because, if it gets worse, your credibility as a leader and your ability to assess the situation is in question. You need to be as clear and as honest as possible. It actually can help give confidence. If people in the organization see that the leader recognizes the severity of the situation, I think that helps with the leader’s credibility and helps people connect with the leader.

**Lindsay:** It does help with credibility and while it doesn’t help give any more control over the situation, it honors the moment in that you are sitting there as the commander saying, “I understand, and I am here with you.” To the point about the Assistant Professor in the Math Department, I think with everything going on, they may now feel more a part of the institution than they ever have before. In normal circumstances, I think it is easy for people in an organization to feel more compartmentalized in their smaller units and not necessarily see how things are impacted across the enterprise. However, with the current situation, it is all hands on deck, all members are affected, and we are all going through this process together. It’s all in.

**Silveria:** Yes. It was important to me from the beginning that when we started doing these weekly updates, that they were sent to cadets, permanent party, and everyone in the same way. I sent it out to everyone at the same time because this is not about training and developing cadets. It is not about curriculum. It is not about budget items. It is about something that impacts us all. So, everyone sees that we are all in this together.

**Lindsay:** With that in mind, and looking a bit forward, you spoke about being intentional about

adding things back to the calendar, how do you think this is going to affect how we think about development and preparing cadets for the Air and Space forces moving forward? What kinds of changes do you think this is going to drive for us or what questions will be able to ask that we weren’t able to before?

**Silveria:** There are a couple of things. First off, this is only the next one. There will be another one and another one. This is the COVID-19 one. We are going to come out of it, but there will be another something in the future. There are billions of people around the world. Something else will happen. I hope we take an opportunity as a Service, a Department, and as a

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country to realize that we are going to do this again in some fashion. We have fire departments because we know something is going to catch on fire. Now, we are going to need to have a more robust Public Health aspect because it is going to come again. I think that is one thing that I think about with future impact and future leadership.

I also think that there is an agility that you gain from reacting. If you are used to reacting to something, and then come back, and then react to something else, and then come back, there is an agility that an organization gets from that process that is amazing. For example, if in January, before COVID-19, I decided to go about the process of transitioning our curriculum to 100%

online. What do you think the prediction would be for the amount of time it would take to do that? Six months or a year? The prediction would likely be somewhere in that range. The reality is that they did it in 9 days! I've witnessed that organizations that do things like that, they gain an agility. A sort of "Nothing is impossible approach." Now, did we break some glass doing it in 9 days? Yes. Was it optimum? No. Are there pieces that may have been missing? Likely. But, it still showed the organization's and individual's agility to react.

**Lindsay:** Exactly. It is important to mention that because it is easy to get caught in the churn of events. But, to be able to sit back and remind people of what was accomplished and the potential opportunities that could be gained from the situation is important.

**Silveria:** Everyone jokes now about the fact that we will never have another snow day. It's the fact that the agility is acknowledged that is important. Back to the above example. If in January, I said, "I'm tired of the snow days. I want you to convert the curriculum so that we don't have another snow day." That would have taken a while. Now, I'm hearing conversations that doing it this way was actually better doing it via mediums like Microsoft Teams and other processes because it was more efficient. We learned a lot and I think we are going to stumble into some of that, in a good way. The situation is forcing us to be agile and that agility can result in us having new capacities that we didn't have before.

**Lindsay:** Thank you for the conversation and time. As we wrap up, are there any parting thoughts that you would like to share?

**Silveria:** Based on some questions that you had sent me earlier, one of them stood out to me. You asked what was the thing I was most proud of as the Superintendent? Prior to COVID-19, I would have said

the idea that over the past few years we have advanced and improved things in a lot of different areas. For example, we realigned the Air Force Academy Athletic Corporation as well as the research enterprise. We have had advances in space and remotely piloted aircraft. We have made changes in basic military training, Mitchell Hall, and facilities construction, money processes, and increased the number of faculty, as some examples. The institution has advanced on many fronts. That is what I would have said that I was proud of, prior to COVID-19. I also think that a lot of those advances displayed themselves in the crisis. For example, there were many items that we worked on regarding Information Technology over the past few years. If we hadn't done that, there is no way that we could have reacted to do the online movement that we did. It would have been impossible. Instead, our Chief Information Officer (the A6 office) was able to react and say since we are all on Office 365, we can just use Microsoft Teams. That wasn't possible before. I am proud that the advances we have made over the last few years have allowed us to be able to deal with the crisis.

A closing comment is that you never want to be in the middle of a crisis. But, watching the team, the institution, people, graduates, and cadets, it is hard not to be proud of the way that everyone has supported each other and helped each other. It has been amazing to watch and be a part of. Watching what people have done to get through this, makes me very proud.

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