

Adapting the U.S. Air Force's combat rescue management practices could improve organizational responses to challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic

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abstract

In this article, we argue that U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) pararescue teams offer a model of best practices that could be adapted by leaders of other organizations during the COVID-19 crisis. AFSOC teams recover and provide medical treatment to personnel in unpredictable and dangerous environments. Our research suggests that the ability of AFSOC teams to operate effectively in situations of uncertainty, complexity, and urgency depends on several critical factors: an operational tempo that includes time for reflection; effective assessment, selection, and training of team members; risk assessment and ongoing revision of the planning process; and fluid leadership with a chief executive who maintains ultimate accountability. These same management practices could be adapted by organizational leaders to help them respond more effectively to the challenges posed by the constantly changing COVID-19 pandemic.

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U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) pararescue teams, commonly referred to as PJ teams, recover and provide medical treatment to personnel involved in combat, natural disasters, or humanitarian-assistance operations. They respond to crisis situations in any environment, even acting as the 911 force to other special operators.¹ As such, they are extreme action teams that “complete their tasks in unconventional performance environments and have serious consequences associated with failure.”² Such teams are a refinement of crisis action teams, which have been defined as “highly skilled specialist teams cooperating in brief performance events that require improvisation in unpredictable circumstances.”³

COVID-19 has put all organizations into unconventional environments in which the consequences associated with flawed performance can be extremely serious, including the loss of lives and livelihoods. Adopting AFSOC management and leadership practices can maximize organizational effectiveness during this crisis.

Operational Tempo

In the U.S. military, PJ teams and other deployable units and assets (such as naval vessels and infantry battalions) operate at a pace that stands apart from that of other units in that they carefully cycle their operational tempo to avoid constant high intensity. At any given time, there are PJ teams training for deployment, on deployment, or coming off deployment and reviewing lessons learned. This deliberate scheduling of time away from intense operations engenders opportunities to reflect on lessons learned from high-tempo operations or crisis responses. These lessons are then integrated into training and put to use in improving effectiveness in the field.

Organizational Takeaway

Mature and well-led organizations generally have risk management protocols in place, but they may lack the time and resources to grow and nurture teams devoted to responding to crises. Resource-constrained organizations

often prioritize short-term and immediate needs. However, accepting long-term risk to maximize short-term gains—dubbed *managerial short-termism*—can be avoided.⁴

Even among organizations with well-developed crisis-response plans and teams, the attention to planning and team design will naturally compete with hectic day-to-day operations, in which competition and market demands invoke constant stress. Organizations can thus suffer from a constant “hair-on-fire” reality that degrades both short- and long-term effectiveness.

To be effective in the ongoing and constantly changing COVID-19 environment, organizations should form crisis-response leadership teams. These teams should be organized so that leaders periodically cycle off active crisis duty to reflect on lessons learned and ways to integrate new pandemic developments into the crisis response. It can be tempting for organizational leaders to take an all-hands-on-deck approach in times of crisis, and in the case of a single-event crisis, such as a security breach or a product failure, this response works. The difference with COVID-19, however, is that the crisis continues to evolve, and its length and lasting impact are unknown. In this type of highly complex, rapidly changing environment, adopting AFSOC’s approach of creating time for crisis-response leaders to step away from day-to-day crisis response is critical. This break will give leaders time both to reflect on the efficacy of the current organizational response and to consider how to adapt and improve the ongoing response. Although most organizations do not have the structure and resources to field redundant response teams that can relieve one another on the front lines, they can be deliberate in designating a defined weekly time when all members of the crisis-response leadership team can gather together away from interruption to share field lessons, be briefed on recent changes in the pandemic environment, and review and update planned responses.

Team Selection & Training

The selection and training of PJs (that is, individuals on PJ teams) is integral to ensure their

ability to respond to crisis under extreme conditions. AFSOC takes seriously the overall process of onboarding and training these combat rescue troops because organizational success is contingent on individual soldiers' mission-specific competencies, commitment to mission, and acceptance of great personal risk.

AFSOC's 12-week Assessment and Selection course evaluates prospective PJs holistically. Demanding physical training, swim, and run time requirements push candidates to their physical limits. In addition to physical tests, Assessment and Selection also includes peer reviews and psychological tests to identify candidates who are team players, ethical, and in possession of the requisite professional character traits. Training instructors conduct and run a carefully designed training schedule, which has an attrition rate of over 80%, to evaluate whether a candidate possesses the mental and physical capacity to do what is required in the line of duty. The selection process that a prospective recruit undergoes provides the foundation for the candidate's ability to operate effectively during a crisis and gives the person a sense of whether they will be able to rise to the challenge of the mission and culture when operating in hostile conditions. Ultimately, the selection process allows for evaluation of physical aptitude and, more important, attitude and toughness.

After they are selected, prospective PJs enter the Pipeline, an extensive two-year training program to learn the skill sets required to operate as a member of an AFSOC team. Each step of the selection and assessment process involves 360-degree rankings of prospective PJs, where all candidates are ranked in numerical order by training commanders, officers, and fellow candidates according to performance. PJs who consistently rank in the lower quadrant of the 360 ranking can be removed from training. Once PJs successfully complete the Pipeline, they are assigned to operational units and begin to deploy. The universal selection process allows for community morale and cohesion, and the shared skill set ensures that teams maintain skill redundancy. Most important is that the ranking ensures that all team members

trust one another and are familiar with each team member's capability and strengths. AFSOC designs PJ training and culture to foster mutual respect and capability among the PJ community, greatly enhancing teams' crisis response in subsequent real-world operations.⁵

Organizational Takeaway

It is not realistic to expect organizations to mirror AFSOC selection and training processes, but some important principles can be gleaned. Leaders must be carefully evaluated and vetted before being selected for an organization's crisis-response leadership team. Selection for this team is best done through both a historical review of the individual's organizational contributions as well as a 360-degree feedback evaluation to determine the level of aptitude, attitude, toughness, and commitment to mission and culture the individual will bring to the team. Traditionally, organizations have used 360-degree feedback and similar tools from human resource departments to review performance, and it may be tempting for organizations in the midst of a crisis to skip this step; however, crisis-response leadership team members must be highly regarded as team members and professionals if they are to have the influence necessary to be effective in driving organizational response.

Once a crisis-response leadership team has been selected, training should be provided not only to develop the team's capacity to conduct business but also to build esprit de corps within the team and establish a shared decisionmaking framework. Because the selection process will have identified top-caliber organizational members, the training process need not be extensive, although it should be deliberate so as to get all team members on the same page and give the team an opportunity to adopt a shared team culture. Training should include pandemic information; the organization's vision, mission, and culture; and procedures and approaches for setting goals, planning, and operating. Scenario training and "wargaming" (explained in the next section) can further enhance individual members' capabilities and align team members within the framework of the organization's mission and culture.

Risk Assessment & Operational Analysis

All branches of the military use a planning process to develop and identify courses of action (COAs) to respond to potential crises. The *Joint Planning* process manual (*JP-5*) describes COAs as “a potential way (solution, method) to accomplish the assigned mission.”⁶ Developing COAs helps mitigate the risk of a given crisis by identifying critical variables that have the potential to significantly affect outcomes; they also help in identifying necessary responses and decisions on a particular aspect of the crisis. Military leaders will often use wargaming—working through various scenarios—as a way to walk through or simulate each COA and consider the risks to the team and the mission. During wargaming, planners document perceived or anticipated risks and develop a variety of plans and heuristics to aid their decisionmaking during a crisis. Wargaming allows the team to identify tasks, necessary equipment, critical events, organizational issues, command and support relationships, the timeline, and potentially harmful consequences of any miscoordination.

Organizational Takeaway

Crisis-response leadership teams should develop COAs as described in the *JP-5* to plan responses for different COVID-19 scenarios. For example, a business that depends on large-scale gatherings of people might develop several different COAs to be ready for multiple scenarios depending on the speed with which a vaccine becomes widely available. COAs should be articulated such that the organization’s mission or task can be accomplished by following the COA during an anticipated crisis. The magnitude and variety of organizational impacts resulting from COVID-19 make it critical that COAs are complete, feasible, consistent with organizational doctrine, and in compliance with guidance set out by executive authority.

Wargaming allows team members to evaluate how well each COA would perform in the face of potential risks and other variables. In the case of the COVID pandemic, these variables

could include additional waves of infection, the timing and efficacy of a vaccine, the availability and use of testing, financial market volatility, and consumer willingness to reengage in commerce. Weaknesses exposed by wargaming can be addressed and incorporated into revised COAs.

As important as the COAs are, leaders must recognize that planning tools can oversimplify the situation or fail to anticipate future events. As such, crisis-response leadership teams should regularly review and update the COVID-19 COAs as new information becomes available.

Fluid Leadership & Accountability

Because of the effectiveness of team selection and training as well as the process of risk assessment and operational analysis, leadership in a PJ team becomes fluid and dynamic. Daniel Goleman, originator of the concept of emotional intelligence, noted that “the most effective leaders switch flexibly among the leadership styles as needed. . . . Such leaders don’t mechanically match their style to fit a checklist of situations—they are far more fluid.”⁷

PJs train to understand when and how to move between fluid and traditional leadership structures. For example, during a crisis, the commanding officer often defers to PJs with the appropriate subject-matter expertise to lead relevant parts of the mission. Fluid leadership entails using the best qualified individual to lead based on context. Ultimately, however, the commanding officer is responsible for the overall outcome of a given mission and the overall success of the team. Within this structure of accountability, though, leadership in the field rests with the individual best situated to align the team around mission success.

Organizational Takeaway

In an organization, fluid leadership capability will most likely need to be specifically acknowledged and adopted by members of the crisis-response leadership team, especially if this is not a normal mode of operation for the organization. Members should be prepared to

step up and lead when their core competence is most relevant to operational success. Fluid leadership is not an abdication of accountability for a chief executive, however. The chief executive must rely on the team to communicate clearly and must acknowledge and incorporate those insights in a way that serves the overall team's interests. Although the chief executive can and often should fluidly delegate authority to a member of the crisis-response team, he or she can never relinquish overall accountability and responsibility.

Conclusion

Organizational leaders facing the myriad threats created by COVID-19 can learn from AFSOC's extreme action team planning and design. Appointing and empowering a crisis-response leadership team of capable and committed subject-matter experts to gather, assess the situation, and lead initiatives responding to the pandemic will help those organizations survive and thrive. Leaders should seek to adjust and design the team's operational tempo, allowing time for members to step away from day-to-day

crisis management for reflection, learning, and future crisis-response planning. Teams should adopt risk assessment and operational analysis management practices borrowed from AFSOC and the U.S. military, such as those described in the *JP-5*, to identify the best courses of action to manage their response. Team leadership should be allowed to shift fluidly as context dictates, although ultimate responsibility lies on the shoulders of the chief executive. As teams coordinate and lead their organizational response, team members must provide timely and thorough feedback so that the chief executive can clearly, factually, and fully manage communications as is appropriate for different stakeholder groups in the rapidly evolving, extraordinarily complex crisis created by COVID-19.

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Summary Table. Practices from U.S. Air Force extreme action teams that could be adopted by civilian companies, institutions, & organizations facing challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic

Category	U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) practice	Civilian organization practice
Team purpose	AFSOC extreme action teams plan and carry out missions to recover and provide medical treatment to personnel in unpredictable environments where failure could have serious outcomes.	Crisis-response leadership teams plan and carry out organizational responses to crises affecting organizational operations, including the COVID-19 pandemic.
Operational tempo	Extreme action teams regularly cycle through training, deployment, and reflection (lessons learned).	Team members should cycle on and off "active duty" to allow time for reflection and revision of ongoing response.
Team selection	Prospective candidates undergo physical fitness tests and 360-degree rankings based on evaluations of aptitude, attitude, and toughness.	Selection criteria should include a review of an individual's historical performance and a 360-degree performance evaluation.
Training	Team members train for two years to master skills, build group trust, and align with mission and culture.	Team members should complete shared training to build trust and align with mission and culture.
Risk assessment and operational analysis	Teams develop courses of action (COAs) and use wargaming to help identify and plan for risks.	Teams should develop COAs to respond to different scenarios for how COVID-19 might play out and continually review and improve COAs as conditions evolve.
Fluid leadership and ultimate accountability	Functional hierarchy defers to subject-matter experts on the extreme action team. However, the commanding officer is ultimately responsible for the outcome.	Chief executives should practice and acknowledge fluid leadership. Team members should be prepared to step up when their core competence is most relevant. However, the chief executive is ultimately responsible for the outcome.

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