

Case Analysis:

The MOVE Disaster

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Introduction:

On May 13, 1985, Philadelphia police clashed with an armed group of anti-establishment cultists known as the American Christian Movement for Life- colloquially referred to as “MOVE.” The resulting standoff between MOVE members and police at the group’s compound at 6221 Osage Avenue in the Cobbs Creek section culminated in the use of plastic explosives by the police, which sparked a large fire that leapt from row-house to row-house, engulfing nearly three city blocks. Although tensions between the Philadelphia police department and MOVE dated back to the group’s inception in the early 1970’s, the incident on May 13, 1985 resulted in the deaths of eleven individuals and the destruction of sixty-one homes. The ensuing investigation of the debacle generated intense scrutiny of the mayor, W. Wilson Goode, who delegated much of his authority to the police commissioner. Prior to this calamity, Mayor Goode was known as a hands-on leader, perceived to be very capable by the citizenry. The subsequent political fallout ruined his reputation as an effective leader.

In order to ascertain the motives behind Mayor Goode’s decision-making processes, one must first identify the constraints imposed upon public administrators by the very nature of their position, and then differentiate between effective and ineffective responses to challenges.

Theoretical vs. Practical Decision-Making:

In describing the inherent difficulty of drafting public policy designed with specific goals in mind, Charles E. Lindblom noted that there is an apparent disconnect between the expectations of the public and the discretionary leeway of the public servant,

which can lead to tunnel-vision: “That is to say, their prescribed functions and constraints- the politically or legally possible- restrict their attention to relatively few values and relatively few alternative policies among the countless alternatives that might be imagined.” (Lindblom in Stillman, 2005, p. 224) Lindblom offered two models for executive decision-making: a rational-comprehensive model (“by root”) and that of successive limited comparisons (“by branch”). The pressures imposed upon a public administrator include pleasing a diverse constituency, which means acting in an expedient manner. Combined with budgetary constraints, this renders it exceedingly difficult to approach decision-making in a rational-comprehensive fashion, which entails disregarding accumulated real-world experience in favor of a predominantly theoretical model. The complexity of the problems facing public administrators, then, precludes the feasibility of the rational-comprehensive approach. The result, in Lindblom’s opinion, is a series of incremental steps that reduces theory and obviates analysis in favor of consensus. “For the method of successive limited comparisons, the test is agreement on policy itself, which remains possible even when agreement on values is not.” (Lindblom in Stillman, 2005, p. 228) Although the “root” model is more readily applicable to the multi-dimensional problems often encountered by public administrators, its lack of analysis de-emphasizes possible outcomes and alternatives, which led to catastrophe in Philadelphia.

The Value of Values:

Central to Lindblom’s conception of decision-making is the notion that it is driven by nebulous- and often conflicting- values. Public administrators have a difficult time

prioritizing values, because, “There often are no preferences in the absence of public discussion sufficient to bring an issue to the attention of the electorate.” (Lindblom in Stillman, 2005, p. 226) The key difference between the “root” model and the “branch” model resides in the relationship between value goals and empirical analysis. The “root” model is concerned with the “clarification of values or objectives distinct from and usually prerequisite to empirical analysis of alternative policies,” while the “branch” model espouses that, “selection of value goals and empirical analysis of the needed action are not distinct from one another but are closely intertwined.” (Lindblom in Stillman, 2005, p.225) In essence, the “root” model is aptly named, because it begins with values as its core, and is unwilling to compromise its values, even if this means scrapping the current course of action and beginning anew. By contrast, the “branch” model is a more organic process that involves a divergence from the initial values, because of the external pressures imposed by real-world forces on the organization. Unfortunately, the inherent flaw of the “branch” model is that values may be lost in transition.

Good Decision, Bad Decision:

How can values complicate the decision-making process? Lindblom asserted that, “Even when an administrator resolves to follow his own values as a criterion for decisions, he often will not know how to rank them when they conflict with one another, as they usually do.” (Lindblom in Stillman, 2005, p. 226) Reconciling conflicting values places the public administrator in an incredibly stressful situation, especially if there are no satisfactory solutions in sight. Citing psychologists Irving Janis and Leon Mann, author Jack Nagel noted, “When a decision maker is faced with an emotionally

consequential, no-win choice, how he or she copes with the problem depends crucially on two factors- hope and time.” (Nagel in Stillman, 2005, p. 241) Ideally, an administrator confronted with a seemingly no-win situation adopts a pattern of vigilance, which mirrors the rational-comprehensive decision-making model. Janis defined the vigilant decision maker as one that:

Canvasses a wide set of alternatives; considers the full range of goals and values involved; carefully weighs costs, risks, and benefits; intensively seeks and accurately assimilates new information; reexamines all alternatives before settling on a final choice; makes detailed provisions for implementing the chosen course; and devotes special attention to contingency plans. (Nagel in Stillman, 2005, p. 241)

What this suggests is that, although the “branch” model is highly successful in terms of expedience, in situations with several unattractive outcomes, an administrator should utilize the “root” approach, because of its superiority in considering and mitigating potential consequences.

Prior to extreme protest by neighbors in the community surrounding the MOVE home, Mayor Goode appeared content to adopt what Janis defined as a “defensive avoidance” strategy. Defensive avoidance is a mechanism that “typically occurs when there is no overwhelming pressure to change the existing policy even though its consequences are highly unfavorable.” (Nagel in Stillman, 2005, p. 241) As a coping strategy, defensive avoidance “satisfies a powerful emotional need- to avoid anticipatory fear, shame, and guilt.” (Nagel in Stillman, 2005, p. 241) When prompted by mounting pressure to deal with the increasingly growing problem MOVE was creating in the Cobbs Creek section, Mayor Goode lost the asset of time, which prevented him from coming back to a vigilant mindset, and adopting a rational-comprehensive approach.

When the element of time is lost, an individual faced with a no-win situation may desperately attempt to resolve the situation as quickly as possible, at the expense of other possible solutions. Myopia sets in, and the administrator becomes what Janis referred to as “hypervigilant.” Nagel cited Janis’ assertion that an administrator adopts hypervigilance to quell both the emotional conflict caused by internal values and the effects that stem from the problem itself in one fell swoop:

“Responding to the strong desire to take action in order to alleviate emotional tension,” the hypervigilant decision maker “superficially scans the most obvious alternatives open to him..., hastily choosing the first one that seems to hold the most promise of escaping the worst danger.” (Nagel in Stillman, 2005, p. 242)

The ensuing tunnel vision impairs the administrator’s capacity to perceive the potential repercussions of executing the ill-advised plan. Consequently, the administrator’s hasty transition from inaction to action is often more detrimental than the exacerbation initially created by the reluctance to confront the situation head-on.

Mayor in the Headlights:

The MOVE case is an extreme study in conflicting personal values. Mayor W. Wilson Goode saw himself as a man of peace, and his leadership style relied extensively on the consensus-building component of the “branch” model of decision-making. Indeed, Nagel noted that prior to the MOVE incident, “The few criticisms of Goode during this period centered on claims that he was too willing to appease opponents and too reluctant to lead in the absence of consensus.” (Nagel in Stillman, 2005, p.244) Mayor Goode’s values stood in sharp contrast to the use of terminal force, but his unwillingness to take preventative measures to ensure the safety of police officers and MOVE members alike

resulted in eleven fatalities – five of which were children. It is ironic that Goode's initial reluctance to use force inadvertently cost lives. As an African-American with a history of activism, Goode may have also been somewhat sympathetic to the plight of MOVE, which diminished his capacity to assess the situation objectively. Once pressured into action by members of the community, Goode may have felt ineffective as a leader, at which point hyper-vigilant myopia set in, and contingency planning was thrown out the window. When confronted with a seemingly no-win situation, Goode retreated into his office and adopted what Janis identified as defensive avoidance, followed by hyper-vigilance, once external pressures made inaction too costly. Once the hyper-vigilant strategy of proceeding with the ill-advised plan had been adopted, Mayor Goode was still incapable of reconciling his ethos of non-violence with the grim reality of an armed cult with innocent hostages (in this case, their own children.) Essentially, Goode froze, like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car.

Analysis:

While it is certainly easy to point out the critical failure of Mayor Goode to assume a more hands-on leadership role in such a potentially volatile situation, little can be gained by focusing exclusively on Goode as an individual. The MOVE disaster underscores the danger of discounting the human element of leadership- its fallibility. Although political reality dictates that we act expediently, it is imperative that we carefully weigh our options against the potential consequences and provide leaders with the insight necessary to identify when they are exhibiting defensive avoidance and/or hyper-vigilance. Similarly, a choice is not correct simply because it coincides with our

values, or because there is consensus. Groups, like individuals, have the capacity to make poor decisions, and group-think can impair an organization's ability to function, because it does not provide for self-examination. What can be gleaned from Lindblom and Nagel's seemingly diametrically opposed view of the decision-making process is that the absence of differing opinions results in fewer alternative approaches. By limiting our potential for contingency planning, we grant no-win situations undue influence over our actions, at the expense of the public good.

Bibliography:

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