

Meta-Leadership Summit for Preparedness

SUCCESS STORY

NEW JERSEY

Meta-Leadership during the Deepwater Horizon Response

Contributor: Commander Benjamin Cooper

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During the early days of the response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010, Commander Benjamin Cooper was assigned to the Incident Command Post (ICP) in Houma, Louisiana, as one of the U. S. Coast Guard’s Deputy Incident Commanders overseeing operations in the Gulf of Mexico and along the coast of Louisiana. He described the task as “a situation requiring tremendous leadership, team coordination, and resiliency.”

Living “Meta-Leadership” to lead through a crisis

Cooper first arrived on the scene approximately 12 days after the spill began and was faced with an overwhelming situation requiring organization and leadership of many parties as well as an intense environmental clean-up response. The ICP was tasked with coordinating efforts to disperse, burn, and skim the oil that was continuing to spill, and prepare for the oil to come ashore. “We had to organize and pull everyone together from the federal, state, and parish governments, as well as BP and thousands of contractors. We were urging each party to overcome differences and let go of what was in it for them, and see what was in it for all of us,” described Cooper. Cooper related his leadership experiences during the response to those taught during the New Jersey Meta-Leadership Summit for Preparedness he attended in August 2008. Like the lessons discussed in the Summit, Cooper was actively living Meta-Leadership during the Deepwater Horizon response, working to “lead within,” “lead up,” and “lead across” his silo.

Leading through political challenges to meet the needs

“One of the most challenging aspects of the early Deepwater Horizon response was the organization and leadership it took for all parties to agree on a common strategy for allocating and deploying a very limited supply of oil protection boom,” Cooper described. Oil protection booms are temporary floating barriers used to contain an oil spill and protect sensitive environmental areas. During the Deepwater Horizon response, there simply was not enough boom to cover the total affected area of the spill, which covered a distance from Texas to Florida. “We were in triage mode,” said Cooper. Not only were response leaders faced with the environmental effects of the lack of boom, but they were also dealing with the politics surrounding the issue of which areas would receive boom and the resulting public opinion that those areas covered by boom were better protected and perceived as more important than those not covered. The leaders were faced with identifying a solution that would provide transparency, equitably share resources, overcome political challenges, and best utilize the boom that was available to be most effective for the response. Cooper described how challenging it was to come up with a plan that all stakeholders, including elected officials, emergency planners, the National Guard, BP and other private sector businesses, and citizens of the affected regions, could accept.



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Response reinforces the concepts of Meta-Leadership

His experience with Deepwater Horizon helped reinforce valuable concepts discussed at the Meta-Leadership Summit, specifically how critical connections and relationships are to effective preparedness and response capacity. Commander Cooper continues to call on these lessons learned in his current position in the Office of Budget Development for the Coast Guard's Deputy Commandant for Operations located in Washington, DC.

The Meta-Leadership Summit for Preparedness empowered business, government and nonprofit leaders to act together in times of crisis. The five-year initiative connected 5,000 business, government and nonprofit leaders in 36 communities. For resources and more information about Meta-Leadership visit the [CDC Foundation Meta-Leadership Website](#).



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