

SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS

Alert. Relaxed. Collegial.



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kayakers_in_Redwood_City,_California.jpg

Recap of 10/24/19 Video Conversation with Eric McNulty, National Preparedness Leadership Initiative, Harvard University

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

Since 2003, this network has introduced federal employees who show up intentionally to others who focus on improving public service. Time after time, that has led to impactful dialogue on a level playing field and continuing professional relationship.

Eric McNulty hit my radar when the Excellence in Government senior fellow who handled logistics for our first dinner completed a similarly cross-cutting National Preparedness Leadership Initiative (NPLI) program with her TSA executive cohort. Among other things, the NPLI program equips incident commanders and others with a [Meta-Leadership](#) mindset that expands their ability to marshal cooperative behavior across jurisdictions in a crisis. Since that mindset is central to coping with complex, rapidly changing circumstances, it made sense to see if we could meet up.

In addition to his co-authorship of the new book, [You're It: Crisis, Change, and How to Lead When It Matters Most](#), our speaker has written frequently for *Strategy+Business*. You can read more about Eric's professional interests at <https://ericmcnulty.com/>.

Because the NPLI's focus is so important, everything after our round of introductions was recorded. If you want to know what happened in the session, you are invited to watch the video. Timestamps and links appear here and on the web page beneath each video.

Several "yes" RSVPs unfortunately were unable to attend, yet the conversation proved to be a rare opportunity to think and learn with a cutting-edge leader for those who participated from offices at the Department of Veterans Affairs and Federal Student Aid and in Bethesda (GAO, retired). Please consider joining us in the future.

Sincerely,

Kitty Wooley

[Video 1 of 2 \(first half of conversation\)](#)

0:01:02 Screen share begins

0:01:09 NPLI Field Research on timeline: Eric describes some projects. "What we have tried to do is embed ourselves with the people who are leading, during an event where possible, and as soon thereafter when not ..."

0:01:50 The role NPLI alumni play

0:02:08 Eric's prior business background at HBS Publishing

0:02:50 Deployment to Deep Water Horizon with Peter Neffenger and Mary Landry, USCG

0:04:05 The purpose of shadowing incident commanders

0:04:55 Introduction and walk-through of the Meta-Leadership model (The Person, The Situation, Connectivity) and the skills that are involved in leading an incident response

0:07:22 How the new book fits in

0:7:30 Topic for discussion with today's participants. Alumni were asked, "Have you observed leader behaviors that either improved team performance or degraded it?" and here are the results showing the incidence of behaviors they associated with good or bad performance.

0:10:54 Asked alumni "How many of you had any training related to this?" prior to their ICS (Incident Command System) training. What the results were and why it matters. Discussion follows.

0:22:45 Responding to a cognitive bias issue

0:23:20 Working with your brain under stress

0:24:41 Effects of assumptions former military leaders bring into civil service and the disconnects that can occur. Discussion of experience from both perspectives. Two helpful books: Michael Watkins' [First 90 Days](#) and [First 90 Days in Government](#). The bigger transition for an executive participant who entered civilian government after his flying career is the one Marshall Goldsmith described in [What Got You Here Won't Get You There](#).

0:32:36 How to have a robust and disciplined knowledge acquisition process in the middle of a crazy situation: explanation of new Driving to the Known model. In large, complex events, it's not enough to stay in the top two boxes. Taking hidden knowledge and making it accessible via crisis register. How to work with the stuff you can't know. Discussion.

[Video 2 of 2 \(second half of conversation\)](#)

0:03:55 Admitting ignorance is a strength. Eric's model for this is (U.S. Coast Guard Commandant) Thad Allen, who kept asking, "So, what else am I missing?"

0:04:35 There can be *willful* unknowing of knowns. How to prevent that.

0:06:20 The role of "What If" in imagining unknown unknowns. "What keeps you awake at night?" A good read on this is Michael Beer's HBR article, How to Have an Honest Conversation About Your Business Strategy – includes a formalized process of information gathering from the front lines in a way that makes it impossible for the top to ignore what they want to ignore. Opens up the information pipeline (people are waiting for permission and political cover). <https://hbr.org/2004/02/how-to-have-an-honest-conversation-about-your-business-strategy>

0:11:10 More detailed description of the crisis register and its use. How do you help people tap into what came before? Meta-tagging entries makes information re-discoverable quickly. Could include between-the-lines stuff such as what surprised you, how you dealt with low morale, and who to go to.

0:14:45 NPLI serves as concierge to connect alumni during incidents. Manual process now; would be nice for alumni to have an app.

0:16:25 Some incident case histories, including leadership lessons learned, are available for you to use at <https://npli.sph.harvard.edu/research-council/case-histories/>.

0:18:55 There's a difference between lessons identified, lessons applied, and lessons actually learned.

0:19:30 How do we take care of each other?

0:20:30 If you didn't make a bunch of mistakes during a drill, then the scenario wasn't tough enough.

0:21:00 Drilling and planning can be done in different ways, not all of which are expensive. Examples.

0:24:14 By design, the composition of recent NPLI cohorts is a mix of federal, state, local agencies, military, energy sector, NGA and other intel community, etc. Helps people learn to talk to each other.

0:27:18 Launched an emerging leaders' program in March.

0:27:48 Will run a second master's symposium for alumni in late 2020. Topic under consideration: ethical decision-making. Alumni also will share their lessons learned. We do custom programs for FEMA, etc.

0:33:44 Agreed: there are managers who may just be paying lip service. Role of growth mindset. Discussion.

0:36:06 Radical candor movement at Netflix and an investment firm: "It is the expectation that you will say what you mean and mean what you say." See [Netflix Culture Deck](#).