

Under-reaction: Lessons from Ft. Hood **Bruce E. Roselle, PhD**

The massacre at Ft. Hood, in which an Army major killed 13 and wounded 42 military and civilian personnel, raises important questions about a little-examined behavioral problem: under-reaction. The media seems mostly focused on the question of whether this was a terrorist act or another example of someone “going postal” due to psychological problems. We will not address that question in this paper.

The more compelling question for those of us who coach and train organizational leaders is why so many people suspected issues with this individual, but neither reported them nor took them seriously enough. The question we explore in this paper is what “under-reaction” is and why it exists in the repertoire of human behaviors.

We know that people around Maj. Nidal Hasan noticed or documented these issues, but did not take decisive action:

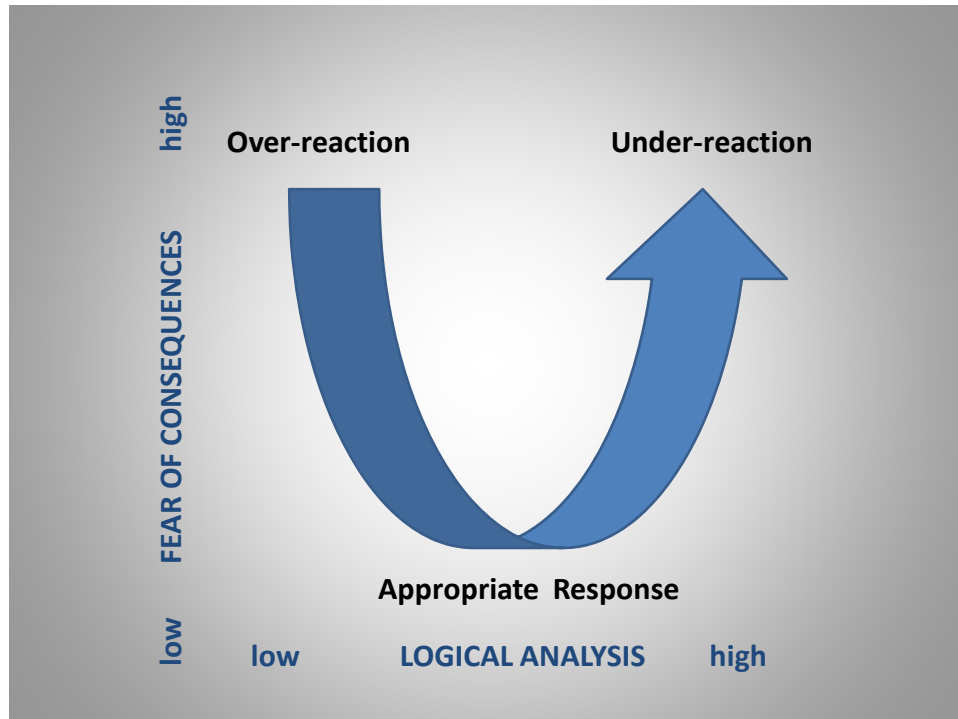
- A former med school classmate described him as a very outspoken opponent of the war in Iraq
- In 2007, his supervisor at Walter Reed wrote a memo claiming that Hasan showed a pattern of poor judgment and lack of professionalism
- Also in 2007, Hasan gave a slide presentation to fellow medical staff at Walter Reed Hospital, in which he stated Muslim soldiers should not serve if they are in a position to injure or kill fellow believers
- In 2008, the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force looked at his email exchanges with a US-born, radical Muslim cleric living in Yemen, but dropped their investigation
- Earlier this year, he came to the attention of law enforcement officials for reasons that are unreported so far
- He recently posted radical Internet statements regarding suicide bombings

There may be excellent reasons why no one connected the various “dots” of issues with Maj. Hasan and concluded that he could be a danger to himself and others. The issues involved unconnected agencies and individuals, occurred over several years, and could have been dismissed simply as cultural insensitivity on the part of the observers. Yet, we cannot help but ask, “what if someone had stepped forward and acted decisively?”

The broader question that becomes a lesson from this tragedy is why people, in general, observe situations and fail to respond appropriately to them. More specifically, why do organizational leaders at multiple levels under-react?

Under-reaction is fear-based. When people fail to respond appropriately in a situation, sometimes it is the result of lack of knowledge or skill to do so. Most often, however, failing to respond is the result of irrational fears and faulty beliefs that undermine a reasonable response. I describe this phenomenon in my book, **Fearless Leadership** (2006). For organizational leaders, under-reacting to situations that present themselves is as dangerous, and perhaps more problematic, than over-reacting. The goal for any leader in any set of circumstances is to respond appropriately, with the right level of timeliness, force, and insight.

What dynamics create the “perfect storm” to make a leader under-react? The graphic, below, illustrates that the two primary factors are level of logical analysis and degree of fear of consequences:



From the graph, we can see that as fear of consequences for taking action increases, the likelihood of an appropriate response occurring significantly decreases. Most often, an appropriate response comes as the result of a moderate degree of logical analysis and a low fear of consequences. When leaders over-react, it is usually the result of a knee-jerk reaction based on high fear of consequences and little forethought. Under-reaction, on the other hand, results from high fear of consequences and too much thought. Unlike over-reacting, under-reacting stems from analysis paralysis.

In **responding appropriately**, leaders typically demonstrate these kinds of behaviors:

- Trust gut intuition
- Spend a reasonable time in analysis before taking action
- Discuss the situation with trusted others for additional perspective
- Use common sense (if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck...)
- Take personal responsibility to act, even if others are also likely to take action

By contrast, leaders who tend to **over-react** to situations often exhibit these types of behaviors:

- Become defensive, angry, and resistant
- Blame others for the situation, find fault outside themselves
- Engage in cultural profiling, projecting their fears onto others
- Sound and look irrational to observers
- React with either passive avoidance or aggressive attack

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The behaviors of leaders who **under-react** typically include these:

- Worry about being politically correct
- Afraid to take risks, make mistakes, or be seen as incompetent by others
- Analyze situations to the point of paralysis, unable to take action
- Believe that others who are more competent, confident will take action, step in to risk the consequences
- Do not trust their intuition or common sense to be correct

Minimizing under-reaction in your leaders. What can organizations do to apply lessons from the Ft. Hood tragedy in order to minimize the negative consequences of under-reaction? Perhaps the most important lesson is to make certain that your organizational culture genuinely encourages leaders to **reward risk-taking**. This does not mean kudos only for those who try and succeed, but also for those who try and fail, and learn valuable perspective in the process.

A second critical lesson is to **promote openness and honesty**, even when it means, “blowing the whistle” on a situation or coworker that could be dangerous or problematic. While you want to fall far short of creating a vigilante environment, it is possible to develop a team-based culture in which people talk straight to each other about behaviors they observe, and, if that fails, talk to their supervisors about potential problems.

It is also important to **encourage taking action**, even if it may occasionally come off as a ready-fire-aim result. Since a key factor in under-reacting is to analyze a situation too much, encourage leaders to move forward into action and know that they can adjust their direction as new facts become available. Emphasize the importance of taking personal responsibility for taking action to address safety, quality, and other issues. If five people shine a light on a potential problem, that should be viewed as preferable to only one person bringing it to someone’s attention.

The bottom line. To paraphrase the observation of Sen. Joe Lieberman regarding the under-reaction at Ft. Hood, “When people become aware of someone behaving in a way that seems extreme, they must reach out to do something before real harm occurs.” How can you reach out and do something? Start with self-examination of the ways in which you might be guilty of under-reacting as a leader in your organization. Then, begin to do what you can to reward risk-taking, promote openness and honesty, and encourage others to take action.