



Lucien Canton is a nationally recognized expert on strategic planning for crisis and disasters. A popular speaker and lecturer, he is the author of the best-selling *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs* used as a textbook in many higher education courses.

Prior to starting his own practice, Mr. Canton served as the Director of Emergency Services for San Francisco and as an Emergency Management Programs Specialist and Chief of the Hazard Mitigation Branch for FEMA Region IX.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in helping managers lead better in crisis.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC)
783 45th Ave
San Francisco, CA 94121
415.221.2562
415.520.5218 FAX
LCanton@LucienCanton.com
www.LucienCanton.com

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Official Visits: The Second Disaster?

Do officials on scene help or hinder?

We've all been there. It's the early stages of a disaster response, you're up to your ears in unmet needs, and someone says those dreaded words, "The Governor's on his way."

Suddenly, the focus shifts and you're dealing with creating photo opportunities, laying out itineraries, arranging security and transportation – all the minutiae that comes with official visits. You're forgiven for thinking, "This is not what I signed up for!"

There's no question that official visits cause pain and the pain increases proportionally with the rank of the visitor. God help the poor emergency manager that should host a Presidential visit.

Are official visits worth the pain and distraction from our core mission? Do they serve a function beyond merely stroking a politician's ego and increasing their chance of reelection? The answer may surprise you.

Political Advantage

There's no question that an elected official's performance in a disaster can make or break them politically.

At the time of the 1906 earthquake and fires, San Francisco Mayor Eugene Schmitz was about to be indicted for corruption. The earthquake delayed his indictment and subsequent conviction and made him so popular that when his conviction was overturned, he returned to politics as a mayoral candidate and was eventually elected to the Board of Supervisors.

The 1989 San Francisco earthquake was slightly different for Mayor Art Agnos. At the time of the earthquake, his Progressive agenda had made him extremely unpopular with voters. His handling of recovery issues, however, resonated with voters. However, his decision to tear down the badly damaged Embarcadero freeway cost him the Chinatown vote and he lost his re-election bid by a very small margin.

What If No One Comes?

While seeing to be active in a disaster has political advantage, what would be the result if an elected official chose to not visit the scene and just let responders get on with their jobs? A recent editorial in the San Francisco *Chronicle* offers a clue.

In an article titled *Oroville disaster highlights stunning lack of leadership*,

Dan Schnur has harsh words for California Governor Jerry Brown's handling of the evacuation of 200,000 residents at risk for a potential flooding from the Oroville dam. Schnur agrees that Brown did everything that was required of him: he mobilized state resources, requested a presidential declaration of disaster, and used political capital to ensure it was approved. There is no question that the crisis was handled well.

But Schnur argues that leadership requires more than just doing what needs to be done. He castigates Brown for not showing empathy with disaster victims and for failing to understand the value of symbolic action.

Doing the Right Thing Not Enough

Empathy with the victims is one of the most critical factors in dealing with a crisis. The perceived lack of empathy on the part of CEO Tony Hayward during the Deepwater Horizon spill in 2010 created a public relations nightmare for BP.

In 2000, there was a mild earthquake in Yountville CA. While the impact on San Francisco was minimal, Mayor Willie L. Brown, Jr. directed that we open the EOC. As we were organizing, Mayor Brown entered, trailed by a slew of reporters, something we didn't normally allow. I winced inwardly but you don't disagree with your boss in front of senior officials and the media. It was then that I learned one of the most important lessons of my career.

With the exception of my colleagues in Napa County directly affected by the earthquake, we were the only EOC activated that evening. That meant that we dominated the news coverage on all the major channels. Every channel carried images of our mayor and senior officials in the

EOC. The message to the public was crystal clear. It didn't matter how small the incident, we were ready on a moment's notice to ensure the safety of our citizens. This was a powerful message.

The lesson I learned that evening was that it was not only important to do the right thing, you must let citizens see that you are doing so. You need to address their fears. Bottrell's Fourth Law of Emergency Management is. "Perception is reality."

The Importance of Symbolic Action

Once we understood the importance of symbolic action, we used it in numerous potential crises, most notably the energy crisis later that year. Our messages were crafted to allay concerns that we knew our citizens had, even if the crisis did not pose a serious risk. In the case of the energy crisis, the threat of rolling blackouts generated considerable fear, even though we knew where and for how long a blackout would occur. By considering the perspective of the recipient, we crafted simple messages that explained what was happening and what we were doing about it.

An official visit may be a pain in the neck to emergency managers but it is often an important symbolic action that has a deeply significant meaning to disaster victims and to field personnel. Schnur contrasts Governor Brown's perceived indifference with the visit to the Yolo County evacuation center by Lt. Governor Gavin Newsom. According to Schur, "...both first responders and evacuees there seemed very grateful for his attention and support." Symbolic action can never substitute for real action but it does play an important role in boosting the morale of disaster victims. 