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Who Are We?

The Case for a Competency Framework

Tom Drabek once wrote that the single most significant change in community preparedness was the increased professionalization of local emergency managers. But that change has been largely by trial and error. Emergency managers came to the field as a second career and, until recently, there was no thought given to formal education or professional development. Despite our progress, we still cannot answer the fundamental question, "What is an emergency manager?"

The question is important. If we cannot answer it, we have no way of knowing if our certification programs, course curricula, or training are adequate. We have no way to prevent an unqualified individual from claiming he or she is an emergency manager. We can't even say what it means to be "qualified."

What's in A Name?

As an example, look at the confusion over whether we are a field, a discipline, or a profession. We use the words interchangeably but they really have specific meanings. In a paper in the [Journal of Emergency Management](#), titled *Field, discipline and profession: Understanding three major labels of emergency*

management, researchers Heriberto Urby and David McEntire attempted to clarify the difference among these three labels by suggesting a progression of field, discipline, and profession where field focuses on practitioners, discipline on academics, and profession on specific characteristics.

Base on the criteria cited by Urby and McEntire, emergency management meets the requirements of a field and has emerged as an academic discipline. Progress has been made towards becoming a profession but our inability to protect our field from competition, particularly from unqualified applicants, is a major drawback to our recognition as a true profession.

What is a Competency Framework?

To define who we are as emergency managers is not an easy task. While we share much in common, we each see our roles differently. This is a function of our experience, training and education, and our unique operating environment. Add to this the different roles we may play and it is apparent that a "one size fits all" definition is not sufficient. What is needed is a competency framework that recognizes this uniqueness and variety.

A competency framework is model consisting of competencies that can be generically applied to the roles within our field. Each competency is defined in clear language in such a way that it is relevant to our field. This helps achieve a common understanding of what constitutes competency in a particular role and serves as a benchmark for measuring performance.

It is important to note what the competency framework is not. It is not a listing of all the tasks that must be performed in a job. It is not a compendium of everything you must know in a job. Instead, it focuses on the competencies needed to do the job and provides indicators for demonstrating that competence.

New Zealand Shows the Way

Surprisingly, a competency framework for emergency management has existed since 2009 when the New Zealand Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management published the [Civil Defence Emergency Management Competency Framework](#).

The CDEM Framework identifies eight key areas covering categories such as leadership, communications, and planning. Each key area has a set of competencies associated with it. Each competency has a list of performance measures grouped by their applicability to all practitioners, supervisory practitioners, or those in significant leadership roles.

What makes the framework so useful is that it identifies the various roles played by emergency managers such as recovery manager, emergency management officer, senior executive, and volunteer, and rates each competency on relevancy and required level of proficiency for each role.

Unfortunately, despite the recommendation of the IAEM Standards and Practices Committee, there has been little interest in adapting the CDEM Framework for use in the United States, except for an ongoing project in the state of California.

Why Do We Need a Competency Framework?

Early I discussed the need to protect our field from non-qualified competition. The ability to demonstrate that someone is unqualified for an emergency management job is certainly one of the benefits of a competency framework. There are, however, several other important advantages:

1. *Curriculum development:* There is a considerable variance among the various curricula offered by higher education programs. A competency framework could lead to standardized core curricula and electives targeted to specific career tracks.
2. *Recruitment:* Current job descriptions tend to be task rather than competency oriented. Further, there are no standard job descriptions available to personnel managers. A core competency framework can help both in developing a standard job description and in targeting specific competencies in applicants.
3. *Performance evaluations:* Competency frameworks offer a standard metric for measuring job competency.
4. *Career development:* A competency framework provides a roadmap for advancement to other positions.

Developing a competency framework is the crucial next step in the professionalization of emergency management. 