



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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Motivating Politicians

Four ways to gain political support for your program

If you don't think there isn't a strong political component to emergency management, you haven't been paying attention. Just look at the research that shows a correlation between Presidential disaster declarations and key states in an election year. Or consider the action of the Mayor of New Orleans during Katrina in delaying mandatory evacuation because of the fear of political fallout if he got it wrong.

But politics is just as important in day-to-day program management. Any program runs on money and politicians control the budget process. There are two things you need to get anything done in government: money and political will. Money can always seem to be found if needed badly enough so it is important for us as emergency managers to be able to generate political will.

Influencing politicians is an art and is never truly easy. However, there are four things to keep in mind that will improve your chances.

Avoid Fear Tactics

One of the things I discourage in public preparedness education is the use of scare tactics. They just don't

work because few people believe that a disaster will affect them. The common belief is:

- That won't happen here.
- If it does, it won't be that bad.
- If it's bad, it won't affect me.
- If it affects me, the government will be there to help.

The same holds true for politicians. No matter what statistics you trot out, a probability of something going wrong is always trumped by the current political crisis. What is immediately in front of them is more important to a politician than something that *might* occur in the future. Telling your elected official that your jurisdiction is prone to flooding will carry little weight unless the water is already lapping around their ankles. This is particularly true if your last flood was well in the past.

Demonstrate Value

There is one question that you must be able to answer and it is a fundamental motivator for any politician: "What's in it for me?" Just showing that your proposal is necessary is not enough; you must demonstrate how it adds value to the community and, more specifically, to the politician.

Shortly after I became Director of Emergency Services in San Francisco, we experienced a rash of residential hotel fires. We assembled an inter-agency team to come up with a strategy for response and a protocol for response using our emergency plan's sheltering annex.

We realized, however, that this did not address the root cause of the problem and identified two mitigation strategies for prevention and recovery. We partnered with a new member of our Board of Supervisors who was looking for an issue and got an ordinance passed that required sprinklers in residential hotels. We could not find a champion willing to take on the residential hotel owners and were unable to get our recovery strategy enacted.

The new Board member who supported us went on to become the Mayor and is now the Lieutenant Governor of California and a candidate for Governor. The sprinkler ordinance was one of the first issues that brought him to the attention of the public.

Answering the question of, "What's in it for me?" can take other forms. Bringing substantial funding to the jurisdiction is always a strong motivator. Some politicians like to be seen as technologically savvy and being on the leading edge of new technology can be a motivator. Eliminating community complaints is another. Establishing a legacy is a motivator for a lame duck politician.

Show Them the Money

Hardly any politician is going to just give you money. After September 11, I was told to hire whatever additional staff I wanted. I advertised and interviewed candidates for two new positions. Only then was I asked how I intended to pay for them. We never got those positions.

If you're going to present a proposal to a politician, you absolutely must have a recommendation for how you're going to pay for it. Grant funding is the most common method and politicians like it because it brings money into the community. They are not quite so happy when there is a matching requirement because it requires them to spend money. In kind matching is preferred as this is essentially a paper shuffle.

There are other approaches that can be effective. If you can demonstrate that your proposal will save money by reducing costs, you've got a good chance of getting approval. It's best when savings are immediate and dramatic. Politicians generally don't think beyond their time in office; a savings accruing over several years isn't as much a motivator.

Show Your Support

The ultimate motivator to a politician is votes, although money is a close second. You can make a strong case for your proposal if you can demonstrate widespread community support. If this support is particularly strong with the politician's constituency base it's even more effective. This means doing community outreach, building coalitions, and developing good media. Remember: perception often equals reality.

Conclusion

Does this sound like a lot of work? You bet it does. But as my old boss, Mayor Willie Brown, says in his book *Basic Brown*, "No matter how righteous your cause, you have to do heavy political lifting to secure the consensus you need to get anything done in the actual political arena..." Like it or not, your job has a political dimension that you must master. 