



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

You may reprint this paper provided you include my copyright, the source, the author, and "reprinted with permission."

Think Before Writing Your Plan

Base your plans on strategy, not templates

Like many planners, I make frequent use of planning templates. Templates serve a number of purposes. They can increase interoperability through standardization. They can ensure that you don't forget critical elements needed in your plan. They also give provide a draft format so you don't have to reinvent the wheel every time you write a new plan.

The problem begins, however, when the template becomes the driving force behind your plan. Too many planners use templates or sample plans as the measurement of success.

It's akin to the problem we have with the Incident Command System where too many planners focus on structure rather than the principles behind the structure. Just because your plan matches the template or sample perfectly doesn't mean it will work.

Why Plans Fail

The mistaken assumption many planners make is that the template is the starting point for developing a plan. You merely fill in the blanks in the template and your plan is

automatically complete and in compliance with applicable guidance. Unfortunately, the result is frequently a plan that looks good on paper but will not work when it is needed in an actual event.

A template is nothing more than a formatting tool. Its utility is in the development of the draft emergency plan. However, before you reach the point where it's time to develop a written plan there are numerous strategic questions that must be asked and answered. Without addressing strategy your plan can never be a true representation of how your organization intends to respond to a crisis.

Confused Organization

One of the classic examples of a lack of strategic thinking is the organization chart that is included in every plan. Normally this chart is organized under the ICS structure and includes all subordinate organizations grouped into sections, branches, and units. While this works well in concept, for most organizations there is no expectation that the organization will ever operate in this fashion.

Consider the typical jurisdiction. The police department is shown as a law enforcement branch working under an operations section chief who reports to an incident commander who may or may not be the mayor. But in reality, the police department operates independently with the chief reporting directly to the mayor and not through an operations section chief. The reason for this is obvious: that's the way they operate daily and the default when in a crisis mode.

The typical organization chart confuses two separate issues: the conceptual organization of the jurisdiction under the plan and the interrelationships among departments versus the tactical organization that will be used to respond to the crisis. We accept the organization chart because it's in the approved template without asking the strategic question. "How will we actually respond?"

Coordination or Control?

This can also be seen in confusion over the role of the emergency operations center. The typical emergency plan shows the EOC as a center of command and control where critical decisions about policy and resource allocation are made.

But the EOC can be many things to many people. The term can be attached to the physical facility or to the activities that take place within it. For some jurisdictions, the EOC is analogous to a command post or area command, providing direction to field elements. But more commonly, the EOC is a point of coordination rather than command. The police chief is still giving orders to her department and talking directly with the mayor while a department representative is present in the EOC.

The strategic issue that needs to be resolved before writing the emergency plan is, "What is the specific role of the EOC?"

More Complex Issues

There is a tendency among planners to stovepipe various plans. We have an emergency operations plan to govern response, a continuity plan for maintaining critical functions, a recovery plan to coordinate reconstruction, etc., all written independently.

However, resources, particularly in a crisis, are finite and each of these plans tend to assume that the needed resources will be available. Further, by being developing plans independently, we can miss the dependencies among plans. For example, if critical functions are not performed, will a key department be able to respond as called for in the emergency plan? Will actions in response hamper future recovery operations or create liability issues?

This brings us back to the question, "How will we actually respond?" In this case, "respond" does not refer to just the immediate life safety concerns but to the full spectrum of life safety response, maintaining critical functions, and recovering from the effects of the crisis. It refers to the strategic concepts on which plans will be based, to operational flow, and to prioritization of effort.

This is the reason why basing your emergency plan on a template without addressing the underlying strategic concepts is a recipe for failure. Strategy is more than just answering questions related to tactics. It requires consideration of the entire range of response and of the inter-relationships and dependencies among various plans. 