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# After-action Reporting Begins Now!

## *Waiting Can Mean Missed Opportunities*

**E**ven though the COVID-19 pandemic is in no way over, it is not too early to begin capturing the lessons learned from response. There is no question that this response will have long-range implications for future operations. We will find ourselves rethinking the design of emergency operations centers, for example, and how we integrate public health agencies into EOC operations. Pandemic planning will become the focus for some time to come and will need to be balanced with other priorities.

The problem with most after action reports is that they are done after the fact. The typical "hot wash" captures issues that are in foremost in the minds of those present, people who are tired and looking to get home. It often misses the input of those who are not present. The after-action review meeting suffers the same fate; key participants are not always present. Even the best surveys have only a limited return.

Consequently, gathering after-action data needs to be an ongoing process that includes a mechanism for capturing issues and solutions as they

occur and debriefing outside agencies and participants who are rotating out.

### **Neglected Administrative Issues**

A common problem with after-action reports is that they tend to focus solely on operational issues. This is not necessarily a bad thing but, in many cases, it means that administrative issues that can generate stress for the EOC team get ignored.

For example, lack of clear instructions for routing calls seems minor but it can result in missed communications of critical information. Email protocols are another source of confusion in EOCs. Even something as simple as using the coffee maker might require specific instructions.

Shift scheduling to support sustained operations is another example of an administrative issue that can generate stress. This is something that is frequently neglected in emergency plans beyond the assumption that a second 12-hour shift will mirror the first. However, as operations progress beyond the initial stages of a crisis, the need for full staffing in the night shift may no longer be necessary.

Instead the need may be for a small team handling critical functions and emergencies. The longer the operation, the more staffing will change, either increasing or diminishing depending on shifting priorities.

One of the issues that has emerged from the pandemic is the realization that even the best EOCs are too small when social distancing is factored in. The fact that EOCs are too small is obvious to anyone who has endured a presidentially declared disaster with its influx of supporting agencies. EOCs are designed primarily to support local disasters; accommodating social distancing and multiple supporting agencies requires that emergency plans should include provisions for activating larger alternate sites.

These types of administrative issues may or may not surface in a typical after-action review but they can generate considerable stress and are the things that people will complain about among themselves.

## Learning the Lessons

We often refer to our after-action reports as “lessons learned.” However, as someone once remarked to me, “It ain’t a lesson learned until you fix the damn thing.” As an example, consider that in almost every after-action report you will find an issue related to communications. It seems we are destined to keep relearning the same “lessons.” To prevent this repetitive learning requires an effective corrective action program.

A common problem with corrective action programs is the inclusion of all issues raised in after-action reviews. However, not all issues carry the same weight. It is necessary to sort out “wish list items” from issues requiring corrective actions. Corrective actions should

focus on systemic issues: issues that have a significant impact on future operations by either correcting problems with or incorporating improvements to the system.

There is a certain amount of art to sorting issues for relevance. Sometimes minor wish list items (requests that appear to have little operational value) can be easily implemented and produce an increase in morale. They don’t necessarily need to make it into the after-action report, but they will be noticed and appreciated.

Another sorting technique is to recognize what issues are systemic and those that are specific to an individual or a group. In some cases, the issue raised by the EOC team may have been the result of a bad decision or a lack of training on the part of an individual. The system itself was sound but its application was flawed. In this case, the issue may best be handled by retraining or counseling and does not require a change to operational plans.

One technique I have found effective is to conclude after-action reviews with the development of an immediate action plan. These are issues that can be addressed immediately within a short time frame and are generally the responsibility of a single agency. This creates an initial commitment to improvement that can be built upon with the completion of a more formal corrective action plan.

Waiting until the operation is over to begin collecting after-action data could mean missing the input of key players. This results in corrective action plans that may be missing significant issues or background information. Don’t let key personnel leave without debriefing them. Trying to catch up later means missed opportunities. 