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# What Do Your Clothes Say About you?

## *Dressing for Success in the EM World*

In prehistoric times, the presence of a stranger in your tribe's area of influence often meant danger. The ability to quickly identify an outsider was a highly desirable survival trait and natural selection rewarded those with this ability. The result was an increased ability to subconsciously recognize visual clues to a person's identity and to quickly classify them as a member or ally of your tribe or an outsider who might pose a threat.

This ability still exists within us today and can explain a lot of our attitudes about race or hostility towards immigrants. But attributes like skin color and cultural differences are extremely overt. We forget that people still react to more subtle visual clues and this may be affecting your ability to be an effective manager.

### **Do Clothes Make the Man (or Woman)?**

In 1975, John T. Molloy published [Dress for Success](#), a book that was to prove highly influential in identifying how people in the world of business dressed. This was followed in 1977 by the equally successful [The Women's Dress for Success Book](#).

What made Molloy's books so successful were that they were based on science rather than opinion. Molloy and his researchers conducted over 15,000 executive interviews to determine people's perceptions of the impact of clothing. In some cases, this research was based on comparisons of photos. In others, researchers were tasked with delivering packages and reported how they were treated.

The results were extremely interesting and reinforces the concept of subconscious visual clues. Something as simple as changing the color of a raincoat produced major training in attitudes towards the researcher. Here are some of Molloy's key findings:

1. The way we dress has remarkable impact on the people we meet professionally or socially and greatly (sometimes crucially) affects how they treat us.
2. People who look successful and well educated receive preferential treatment in almost all of their social and business encounters.
3. Successful dress cannot put a boob in the board room, but incorrect dress can definitely keep an intelligent, able man out.

## Peer Recognition Is Crucial

Although Molloy does not make the connection to outsider recognition, his research can certainly be used to make the case that well-dress individuals are often perceived as insiders and accepted as peers.

Consultant Allan Weiss in his numerous books on consulting emphasizes the importance of being perceived as a peer to the economic buyer. The reason is simple: people take advice from peers and not from those they perceive as lower on the social scale. If you are perceived as an outsider, or worse, as an inferior, your advice may not be easily accepted.

## Technician or Manager?

What has this got to do with emergency management? The question really revolves around how you perceive yourself. Many emergency managers, particularly those from uniformed services, view themselves as experts in response and their most important function as the creation of an emergency plan. Whether they use the term or not, they are technicians.

In my book, [Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs](#), I make the case for the evolving role of the emergency manager as program manager with responsibility for providing strategic advice to senior decision makers.

This is where Molloy's research and Weiss's advice come into play. If you see your role as providing advice to senior decision makers, you must be perceived as a peer. A small step in this direction is dressing as they do. It won't guarantee they'll listen to you but being perceived as an outsider will almost certainly guarantee that they won't.

## How to Dress

One rule of thumb that has proven useful over the years is to dress the way you want to be perceived. For example, during my time in San Francisco, I was part of the Mayor's staff. Consequently, I always wore a full suit because that was the unofficial dress code for his staff. My male staff all wore jackets ties.

A few emergency management offices, particularly those attached to uniformed agencies, have adopted a uniform look of polo shirts with logos and khaki slacks. The look is crisp and distinctive, and I have no problems with it. I have worn such outfits myself during deployment with FEMA. However, the question is how this is perceived by senior officials. This is essentially how technicians dress and may not be the image you want when meeting with a city council or mayor.

Alan Weiss sets great store by identifying the economic buyer in any consulting contract. This is the key decision maker, the person with the authority to commit to and implement a project. The question an emergency manager must ask is, "Who is my economic buyer?" Is it a department head or a senior elected official? Identify that person, and you can begin to build peer acceptance with that individual.

Am I saying that emergency managers must always wear a suit? Definitely not. But I do think we need to consider how those we interact with perceive us and dress accordingly. With clients in San Francisco, I always wear a suit. However, in Silicon Valley, ties are frowned upon and I opt for a blazer and open-necked shirt.

The way we dress should be the least of our worries, but it directly correlates to how we are perceived, and this perception may be a barrier to our effectiveness. 