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

Effective Plans are Toolboxes

Five steps to a better plan

If you've spent more than ten minutes as an emergency manager, you've probably heard the famous quote from General Eisenhower about plans being useless but planning essential. It's as valid today as it was when IKE first used it but maybe we should ask, "If plans are so useless, why bother writing them?"

Part of the problem is how we use plans. To many, a plan is like a cookbook – you follow the recipe to get the results you want. I have seen numerous plans heavy with detail, suggesting that planners have tried to foresee and plan for every possible contingency.

However, it should be obvious that one cannot plan for every possible contingency. The true risk in thinking that this is possible is that you begin to expect the disaster to unfold in exactly the way the plan says it will. This expectation creates confirmation bias that allows one to accept only facts that confirm expectations.

Adapting Military Planning

Emergency plans are generally based on military war planning. This is not surprising, as the first planners were primarily retired military officers hired to help with nuclear war planning. They naturally used the type of planning with which they were most familiar: a base plan that lays out assumptions and planning parameters and supporting documents containing detailed planning data. This format remains largely unchanged to this day.

The problem with this format is that military plans do not stand alone; they are part of a system. They do not dictate how a battle will be fought. Instead, they identify overall intent, define relationships, and lay out control measures and logistics. They assume that the normal hierarchical structures will support the plan. For example, military plans don't spend time talking about command relationships – they specify specific task organizations for the operation with the assumption that they will operate under existing command structures.

Another well-known military maxim is that no plan survives contact with the enemy. No military officer expects to follow a plan exactly. Instead, he or she is guided not by the strictures of the plan but by the commander's intent articulated in the plan. The plan merely provides the resources to accomplish that intent. This flexibility is the key to winning battles.

Rethinking Plans

In *Facing the Unexpected,* researchers Tierney, Lindell and Perry suggest that emergency operations plans have two main functions. The first is to provide internal documentation of agreements among organizations as to the allocation of functions, activation of the response organization, and the direction and control of the response. The second purpose is to serve as a training document that forms the basis for drills and exercises.

Note that the researchers did not suggest using the plan to manage the response. In *Major Criteria for Judging Disaster Planning and Managing Their Applicability in Developing Societies,* Dr. E.L. Quarantelli points out this distinction between disaster planning and disaster management and between response-generated needs and agent-generated needs. Response generated needs remain constant across disasters and can be captured fairly well in our plans. Agent-generated needs are created by the unique demands of a specific disaster.

We need to recognize this distinction and change our attitude towards plans. We need to accept that while plans establish a basis for our response, they are guides only and can be modified based on actual need. Plans establish relationships and responsibilities but the decision as to how best to respond to a disaster should be based on operational need, not on planning assumptions.

Making Plans Work

If your plan is going to be effective, several things need to be in place.

1. You can't plan in a vacuum. Your emergency operations plan must be part of an emergency management program, not an end in itself. It documents things that you have put in place through that program – it doesn't put them in place.

2. Your plan can make assumptions about existing systems or reference other documents. For example, many plans I read have extensive sections on basic Incident Command. Is this necessary with all the existing state and federal guidance? Along the same lines, how much material is in your plan because you need it and how much is there to meet an audit requirement? Simplicity is the hallmark of a good emergency plan.

3. Your plan needs to be user friendly. I recently spent a fruitless hour looking for some information I knew was in a plan because I helped develop the information. I never did find it. Could someone new to your organization find information under pressure?

4. Just because something is in your plan doesn't make it so. Your plan needs to capture agreements that have been made between organizations – it doesn't establish those agreements. I've seen plans that were written without any consultation with the stakeholders. They never work.

5. Remember that every time you use your plan for a smaller incident, you're testing that plan. Don't hesitate to activate and use your plan whenever possible.

Simplicity, brevity, ease of use – these are the things that make a plan effective. As I mentioned earlier, a plan is not a cookbook. It is not a religious text that must be followed to the letter. Instead it is a toolbox. How you choose to use those tools is operational art.