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Emergency Plans: Are They Really Necessary?

Five Steps to Better Response Operations

In my first month as Director of Emergency Services in San Francisco, I was notified about a four alarm fire in one of our residential hotels. Not being really sure what my job was in such cases, I went to the scene and found that about 120 elderly Filipinos, many war veterans, had been displaced. When I asked about our sheltering plan, I was told that our plan was “just for disasters.”

Over the next few days, it became apparent that the usual procedure of dumping the problem on the Red Cross was not working. The Red Cross could not deal with the wide range of issues resulting from an aging population of non-English speakers with significant health and geriatric needs. The City pulled together a task force to deal with crisis but no thought it was necessary to implement the sheltering team identified in our emergency operations plan. After all, that’s “just for disasters.”

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 do we bother writing them?”

Adapting War Plans

Part of the problem is how we use plans. To many responders, 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.

If you stop and think for a moment, it’s 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. You begin to subtly make assumptions and ignore facts that don’t support your expectations. You see what you want to see and what you see may be wrong.

The type of planning typical in emergency management is 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. This consisted of a base document that laid out the assumptions and planning parameters and supporting documents that contained detailed planning data.

Even with the adoption of all-hazards planning in the 70's, the basic planning format remained unchanged and, indeed, is still the norm, even with the growing popularity of the emergency response function format.

The problem with the traditional planning format is that we forgot one important fact: the military plan does not stand alone; it is part of a system.

If you look closely at military plans, they do not dictate how a battle will be fought. Instead, they identify an overall intent, define initial relationships, and lay out control measures and logistics. But they also assume that the normal hierarchical structures of the military will be in place to 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.

There is another well known military maxim 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.

Flexibility in Planning

What's this got to do with emergency management? For too many of us, we allow the plan to dictate our actions rather than allowing the circumstances of the disaster to do so.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Some of our plans set up triggers or indicators for activating the plan. I have seen cases where plans were not activated because the specific triggers were not met, even though there was clearly a need for the type of coordination available through the plan.

One of the Principles of Emergency Management is flexibility and this should extend to how we use our plans. My team in San Francisco once supported planning for a garbage strike because we had the skills and contacts to help address a potential public health emergency. Clearly, this was not a disaster but the relationships and coordination mechanisms identified in our emergency operations plan worked just fine in a lesser event. We got to practice and we scored points with our boss.

On September 11th, the planners in Washington DC used plans that had been designed for other contingencies to recall staff and manage the evacuation of the city. The flexibility they showed in applying these plans led to a fairly successful operation.

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 fairly constant across the 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 they establish a basis for our response, they are guides only and can be modified on the basis of 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, a number of things need to be in place.

1. You can't plan in a vacuum. Your emergency operations plan has to 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 actually 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 really 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?

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.

What happened in San Francisco? We spent two years adapting our planning annex and began using it in all shelter situations. On my last incident, we sheltered and processed over 200 people without any problems. Use your plan!

Works Cited

Quarantelli, E. (1998). *Major Criteria for Judging Disaster Planning and Managing Their Applicability in Developing Societies*. Newark: University of Delaware.

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