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Does Functional Planning Work?

History seems to think so!

With the growth of emergency management and the evolution of a national disaster bureaucracy, we sometimes forget that people have been dealing with disasters for centuries. There seems to be an inherent assumption that our way of managing disasters is better than past systems, which can lead to a tendency to ignore history.

One of the basic concepts of planning that we sometimes forget is that the closer our disaster management organization reflects our day-to-day organization, the more efficient it will be. In times of crisis, people tend to default to the familiar: the lines of authority and practices with which they are most used to. A disaster is no time to implement a new social structure, which is why the Incident Command System doesn't always work for the private sector where training and experience are sometimes lacking.

If in fact our modern techniques of disaster management are efficient, one would expect to see them reflected in the ad hoc mechanisms developed in historical disasters.

18th Century Incident Command?

The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 is considered by many to be the first modern disaster in terms of the response by Sebastiao Carvalho, later the first Marquis of Pombal. The earthquake, estimated at magnitude 8.5-9.0, destroyed the city, generated three tsunami waves, and started fires that burned for days.

The response orchestrated by Pombal is remarkable for many things. However, what concerns us here is his decision to divide the city into a series of districts, each headed by a magistrate with the authority to deal with issues within the district. In modern parlance, Pombal created a series of area commands responsible to a centralized command function.

Recovery by Committee

Carvalho's attempt to organize disaster management into manageable pieces is common in disasters, particularly in recovery and this is where we can see the beginnings of the functional planning that forms the basis of much of modern disaster management.

The Johnstown flood in 1889 saw the city wiped off the map by a wall of water over 60 feet high in places. Debris from the flood backed up against a stone railroad bridge, caught fire, and burned for days. Yet the afternoon following the flood, a group of civic leaders, government officials, and survivors met in one of the few surviving buildings. The group elected a “dictator” (what we would now term an incident commander) and formed six committees that would guide recovery:

1. Finance
2. Supplies
3. Morgues
4. Removal
5. Police
6. Hospitals

A similar approach can be found in San Francisco in 1906. The earthquake, an estimated magnitude 7.9, would have been a major disaster by itself. However, it spawned a series of fires that burned for three days that destroyed most of the city.

By the afternoon of the first day of the disaster, the mayor convened a committee of prominent citizens, civic leaders, and politicians to begin relief efforts. This committee, alternately known as the Committee of Fifty or the Committee of Safety, was divided into 21 functional groups, such as Drugs and Medical Supplies, Resumption of Retail Trade, and Resumption of Water Supply.

In 1917, a munitions ship exploded in the harbor of Halifax, Nova Scotia, destroying most of the town just as a major blizzard was beginning. As we have seen in the previous disasters, the morning after the explosion, citizens met and organized themselves into

functional committees to deal with critical tasks such as transportation, disposal of the dead, and temporary hospitals.

What Can we Learn?

As we look at examples like these, we can begin to identify some commonalities that should be considered as we develop our plans.

- People naturally tend to organize themselves along functional lines and orient on critical tasks. We can certainly identify many of those tasks ahead of time (response generated needs). Our concept of functional planning is on the right track.
- Citizens make little, if any, distinction between response and recovery, the San Francisco Committee of Fifty was formed and continued to meet at the height of the disaster and focused on both. Our concept of “phases of emergency management” is not supported by historical experience.
- Civic leaders will not wait; they want to begin recovery as soon as possible. The citizens of Johnstown realized that their inefficient independent borough system would not work and created a new centralized social structure.
- Response and recovery are citizen-driven. In most of the cases I have seen, the involvement of oligarchs, civic leaders, and social organizations was critical to the success of the various committees.
- In most cases, committees were overwhelmed by the influx of goods, money, and volunteers and had no plans to deal with these. Johnstown had over 7,000 people involved in the relief effort.

History suggests that we’re on the right track with our planning, but we must realize that we still have much to learn from it. 