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Just in Time Training

Tips for orienting EOC newcomers

Botterell's Third Law of Emergency Management states, "No matter who you train, someone else will show up." This is almost always the case in the activation of your emergency operations center. Odds are the first one through the door will be the person who was too busy attend training or missed the exercise or just got tapped for the job.

Our normal practice is to toss them a three-inch-thick binder containing the emergency plan or a "welcome packet" containing a bewildering array of information. I hate to burst your bubble but there are only two chances of that person looking over that material: slim and none. Fortunately, there are better ways to provide the information a first time EOC user needs.

Business as Usual

Let's first consider the traditional approach to providing guidance to newcomers.

- *The Emergency Plan* - There is an assumption that providing someone with the emergency operations plan (EOP) is sufficient to bring them up to speed. After all, the plan, by definition, includes everything they need to know,

right? Unfortunately, we write plans to meet requirements or to comply with guidance, not for the end user which means they contain way too much information for the average user. A newcomer doesn't need to know everything about the community's response strategy; they need to know what actions they must take immediately.

- *The EOC Manual - ASTM E2915-13 Standard Guide for Emergency Operations Center (EOC) Management* discusses the use of an EOC manual that includes the standard operating procedures for operational issues such as EOC activation or demobilization. While the manual serves a necessary function, these tasks will most likely not be performed by the newcomer. EOC manuals also tend to incorporate generic position descriptions and checklists.
- *Position Descriptions and Checklists* - A common tool we provide is a position description and a checklist, either as a handout or part of the EOC manual or plan. There is nothing wrong with this approach. However, by nature these documents tend to be generic. In fact, most of us download basic ICS checklists, make some minor changes, and call it done.

To be effective, checklists need to be specific. That means it needs to be written by someone who actually has experience with the position rather than by an outsider. But remember that you cannot anticipate every situation. EOC checklists are guides not formal processes like a pre-flight checklist

Keep It Simple

As I mentioned, much of what we produce in terms of plans, manuals, or checklists tend to be written from the point of a reviewer rather than that of the end user. They also tend to provide the user with too much extraneous material. Any guidance we provide must be practical and specific, not theoretical and, above all, simple to follow.

The best way to start is to put yourself in the place of that person walking into the EOC for the first time and ask yourself, "What do I really need to do *right now*?" Once you know this, ask the second question, "What information do I need to do this?" Finally, ask yourself, "What would be the simplest way for me to get this information?" Once you can answer these three questions, methodologies for providing the needed information will suggest themselves.

Consider a simple task such as transferring calls, something that may need to be done frequently. Not every system works the same way. I could place instructions in a manual but that means the user would have to dig for it, with the caller on hold. Now think of how simple this would be if the instructions were on or near the phone. The information would be specific and readily available to the user at the time it is needed.

Be Creative

Here are examples of creative ways to share task-specific information:

- *Wall Charts* – These are ubiquitous in EOCs but do the ones you're posting really help the user? In my EOC in San Francisco our wall charts contained information on basic tasks such as printing and transferring calls. We also had key numbers like the nearest fax machine and the EOC Coordinator. In the Palo Alto EOC, wall charts include things like standing objectives and basic questions (essential elements of information).
- *Labels* – It may seem obvious to you, but not everyone is as familiar with your EOC equipment as you are. Labeling equipment with operating instructions or posting them close by on a laminated card can save you a lot of grief. Not everyone knows how to make a good pot of coffee; ask my staff.
- *The Placemat* – The current San Francisco EOC has simplified the old wall charts by creating laminated place mats with basic information that are available at each EOC position.
- *Videos* – The saying that "a picture is worth a thousand words" hold true here as well. It's extremely simple these days to produce a quick video or series of orientation videos. We're not talking about a major production, just a two or three-minute how-to video that answers basic questions.

Whichever way you choose to communicate information, remember that you are not trying to teach the newcomer everything they need to know; you're only trying to get them over the first hour or so until the situation stabilizes. Don't overwhelm them with information that they don't need at the moment but instead focus on immediate tasks. Just in time training is not ideal but it is frequently necessary. The trick is to put things in place that both help the user and conserve EOC resources. 