



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

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Lessons from Loma Prieta

Lasting impressions from my first disaster

Your first disaster has a formative effect on you. The lessons you learn remain with you throughout your career and are often reinforced by new experiences. It is important to learn the right lessons and that comes with reflection over time. Over the years, I have come to realize that I learned some very valuable lessons from the Loma Prieta earthquake.

Loma Prieta was not my first disaster. I'd been involved in brush fires in California, a flood in Arizona, and winter storms in New Jersey. It was, however, my first as an emergency manager rather than an active participant. It would lead to a position with FEMA and a new career in emergency management and to lifelong friendships that would deeply influence the direction of that career.

On October 17, 1989, I had been assigned to FEMA as a military reservist for a little over two months, reviewing emergency plans. I spent the first three days following the earthquake working with the San Francisco emergency operations center and the Regional Office then was assigned to the Disaster Field Office as an administrative officer.

Here are some of the lessons that have stayed with me over the years:

1. ***The severity of a disaster depends on where you're sitting.*** I was enjoying a day off with my children in Golden Gate Park when the temblor struck, so for us it was a bit of excitement. I didn't realize how serious was the impact of the earthquake until I started home and noticed that the traffic signals weren't working. My wife, on the other hand, was home preparing dinner and got the full treatment with the house swaying about her, cabinets opening and the fish tank looking like it was going to hit the ground. She had a very different view of the earthquake's severity than I did.
2. ***The dedication of one person can make a difference.*** No one was assigned to make sure that the generator that kept our public safety radio system working had enough fuel. Fortunately, one of the staff went to the site without instructions and kept it running until commercial power was restored. It was months before anyone realized what he had done to avert a serious problem.

3. ***You must think beyond the short-term.*** It wasn't long before we began to get calls for fuel for generators. The shortage had several causes. Some agencies had been testing their generators regularly but hadn't topped up their tanks, so the amount of fuel available was much less than it should have been. Others just had small tanks to begin with and had assumed they could be resupplied quickly.
4. ***You need to consider potential impacts on critical resources.*** Another "uh, oh" moment came when we realized that with both bridges and all major highways closed, we were isolated from our fuel vendors. To make matters worse, we couldn't even access our existing in-ground supplies because the fuel pumps were dependent on electricity and we had no manual pumps.
5. ***People at are at their best in a crisis.*** It seems that wherever you looked, someone had seen a problem and started to do something about it without being asked. We had volunteers dragging hose, helping ambulance crews, directing traffic – you name it. Our neighborhood jerk – the guy with the decrepit tow truck and the five junked cars on the street – knocked on every door on our block to make sure everyone was alright. He even gave five gallons of gas to the police officer who had given him a ticket the month before.
6. ***The media is a powerful tool for both good and bad.*** Almost immediately, radio stations started broadcasting safety messages and advice, most of it good. (There was one broadcast I heard where people were told it was okay to drink out of the toilet, but that got sorted out quickly.) However, the constant broadcast of the burning Marina district homes by the national media caused a lot of fear among

relatives across the country. Most tuned in, saw the fire and thought the whole City was burning. I later heard a story (that I've never been able to confirm) that a senior official in one of the hardest hit jurisdictions saw the broadcast, assumed all resources were needed in San Francisco, and did not request any assistance for his town.

7. ***No news is not good news.*** I also heard a story, again unconfirmed, that a coordinator of mutual aid resources at the state operations center assumed that when a jurisdiction did not check in with them, the jurisdiction was okay and didn't need help. The situation turned out to be exactly the opposite. A request-driven system must be supported by situation assessment and you can't make assumptions.
8. ***Recovery and mitigation will take years.*** We tend to focus on response, but the real goal must be recovery. When I became Director of Emergency Services for San Francisco in 1996, we still had open claims with FEMA and it took over twenty years to replace the damaged section on the Bay Bridge with a new structure. Things done during response operations can have positive or negative impacts on recovery operations.

Tom Drabek identified what he called the "paradox of emergency management," the fact that those most likely to encounter a disaster are those with the least experience in disasters. Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to assist in the response to a wide range of disasters in the United States and our trust territories. Each has taught me much about how people react to disasters and how to solve unexpected problems. However, the lessons I still remember best are those I learned from the Loma Prieta earthquake so long ago. 