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Manager or Technician?

Improving your role as an Emergency Manager

Readers of my book, *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs*, know that I advocate a change in how we view our role as emergency managers from one of a technical specialist to that of a program manager. If we are to fulfill our goal of building organizational resilience, we need to stop focusing solely on the technical aspects of response and position ourselves as peers of the senior executives we serve.

In a recent [guest column](#) consultant [Wayne McKinnon](#) discusses why technical specialists have problems moving into work of higher value. While he is primarily addressing moving from technical to managerial consulting, I believe his insights are very relevant to the emergency management community.

Single-solution thinking

McKinnon's first point is that technical specialists are taught that there is only one answer to resolve a specific problem. While the [Principles of Emergency Management](#) include flexibility, we tend to emphasize a

one-size-fits-all approach, particularly in the area of planning, that limits creativity and spontaneity.

If we consider the National Incident Management System (NIMS), for example, we find an underlying assumption that a jurisdiction of 200 people should meet the same standards as that of a city of 2 million. There is no provision scalability and no acknowledgement of the differences in resource availability. Implementing documents such as *the CPG 101 Developing and Maintaining Emergency Operations Plans* have become de facto standards. Even theoretical models such as the four-phase comprehensive emergency model have become required planning elements.

By establishing a doctrinal "right way" we have created programs and plans intended to meet legislative requirements rather than ones that can meet local need.

Task-oriented

From the beginning, we have defined emergency management by the tasks expected to be performed in a crisis. The problem, of course, is that these

tasks are solely response oriented and performed by departments and agencies not under the supervision of the emergency manager.

McKinnon suggests that technicians sometimes suffer from tunnel vision. That is, they lack the broader view that allows them to see how the outcomes they produce provide community value. This means that an emergency manager focused on response has a good idea of what the fire department does but may not have a clue about how to integrate financial and personnel departments into response operations.

Lack of business skills

Because most of our job descriptions are task-oriented, candidates are assessed on their technical skills rather than their managerial skills. This means that skills that are vital to program management such as budgeting, goal-setting, personnel management, and organizational development are not considered during the hiring process nor is the opportunity for on the job-training usually available.

This is not just a case of lacking required skills. Managers have a different mindset. They speak differently. They even dress differently. If your senior official does not see you as a peer, you will never be able to provide substantive policy advice.

Staying in your comfort zone

We tend to do what we are comfortable doing. Task-oriented emergency managers are more comfortable with preparedness and response activities because they are technical in nature. Activities required in mitigation and recovery are more strategic in nature and demand the application of managerial skills and concepts.

McKinnon points out that the fear generated by lacking or being unsure of managerial skills can frequently force new managers to retreat to their technical comfort zone.

Upping your game

Part of the problem with making the transition from technician to manager is that there is little incentive to do so. Many of our job descriptions are outdated and written for technicians. This is the perception that your employer has of you. Even our guidance and standards focus on the technical aspects of our job. So how do you make the change?

1. Salespeople are taught that the first sale is always to yourself. So begin by seeing yourself as a program manager.
2. Ask yourself what value you contribute to your organization. If you can't answer this question, you need to do some deep thinking about your program.
3. Do a self-assessment and identify the managerial skills you lack. Then do something about it: ask a colleague for help, take a course, read a book, watch a webinar – but do *something*.
4. Start *managing* your program. Learn and implement tools like administrative and strategic plans, annual work plans, job descriptions, etc.
5. Act the part. Start dressing like the other program managers in your organization. This isn't always about a coat and tie but you'll generally see subtle differences between the dress of managers and staff.

Remember that in crisis, technicians are valued for their skills but it is the managers who decide the issues. 