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Planning for Crisis

Seven Concepts for Better Plans

A significant part of my business involves the review of different types of plans. I've reviewed countless jurisdictional emergency and continuity of operations plans, corporate crisis management and business continuity plans, and even a few non-profit agency plans. Over the years, I've found that no matter what you call your plan, the mistakes remain the same.

The most common mistakes I have found occur largely because of a simple assumption: *we assume that someone is actually going to use the plan at the time of crisis.*

Why do I say this? First, we have social science studies that say plans are not consulted in a crisis, starting with E.L. Quarantelli's study of mass casualty disasters in 1983 and including the University of Washington study following Mount St. Helens in 1980. Secondly, we have considerable anecdotal evidence from experienced emergency managers. The simple fact is that people do not have time to read bulky plans during a crisis; at best they *may* refer to checklists or diagrams.

So why bother writing a plan at all? To answer this, we need to distinguish between planning and the plan. The planning process is absolutely essential if you want an effective response to crisis. The written plan that is developed as part of that process serves as documentation of the concepts, decisions, and agreements made during planning. That documentation in turn serves a number of functions. It can be used as a basis for training, it can guide additional plan development, and it can be used to demonstrate a certain level of preparedness.

Unfortunately, too many plans are written for this last purpose. As soon as a plan is written to meet an auditing requirement rather than in response to risk, it becomes practically worthless. Consciously or unconsciously, the plan writers begin to modify their plan to meet the auditors' concepts of what a plan should be rather than focusing on the needs of the organization. We see this playing out now as jurisdictions rush to revise their emergency operations plans to mirror the National Response Framework and the latest FEMA guidance in CPG 101 *Developing and Maintaining State, Territorial, Tribal,*

Tribal, and Local Government Emergency Plans.

There is nothing inherently wrong in the guidance. There is, however, something wrong with blindly following the guidance without a realistic appraisal of your own jurisdiction's needs and capabilities.

In reviewing plans, I have found that most of them fall into one of three very broad categories:

1. The procedural plan – this plan is characterized by a focus on minutiae and procedure. This type of plan is usually laid out as a series of checklists for either teams or key individuals that provide broad assignments but little detail. A typical item might be something like, “establish emergency shelters”. To understand the concepts on which the plan is based, you need to read multiple checklists and do a lot of cross-referencing.
2. The conceptual plan – this plan is very good at explaining what the planners intend to do but never seem to get around to telling you how it gets done. This type of plan usually contains statements like, “there will be a need to establish emergency shelters during a disaster.”
3. The balanced plan – this is the rare plan that contains an appropriate mix of concept and detail. It explains what needs to be done and how it will be done.

Let me clarify this a bit. You can find all three elements in a plan to a varying degree and, like the FEMA guidance, there is nothing inherently wrong with either a procedural plan or a

conceptual plan. The real issue is, “who is your target audience?”

Plans generally address three different levels – the strategic or management level, the tactical or coordination level, and the operational or responder level. You can address these three levels in separate plans or you can address them in a single plan. Each has separate and distinct needs:

- The strategic level is focused on senior decision and policy makers. They need to understand broad concepts and implications rather than detail.
- The tactical level coordinates the overall response. Coordinators need to understand concepts as well but they also need to understand the details of functional responsibilities and pre-existing agreements.
- The operational level is where the rubber meets the road. Operators need detailed, specific procedures on how to get things done.

So how do you address all three levels in one plan?

1. **Remember that a plan is basically a toolbox, not a blueprint.** Sometimes you can use a tool without any special instructions; sometimes you need an operator's manual. And sometimes you may even use a tool for something other than its original purpose.
2. **Clarify your assumptions.** How do you *really* think this plan will be used? Are you assuming that everyone is fully trained on

the tasks to be done? Are you assuming that everyone has read and understood your plan?

3. **Think systematically rather than just following a format.** Who will have access to the plan and what are their needs? Conceptual material will not be read at the time of crisis but it is invaluable for demonstrating capacity and for training. Procedural material is boring to read but can be important if the person trying to implement a process is, for example, your third tier backup.
4. **Make your plan modular.** The standard format of a basic plan, functional annexes, and hazard specific appendices used by public sector agencies is a good approach but go a step further. Think about how your plan can be pulled apart during a crisis so each team or key individual has all the information they need without being bogged down in superfluous detail.
5. **Design your plan to be user-friendly.** Flowcharts, maps, tables, and checklists catch the eye and can be used to convey considerable information quickly. Make use of such graphics aids when you can. But most importantly, make it easy to find information. Spend some time on your table of contents and consider a crosswalk table of functions if necessary.
6. **Keep it real.** Don't write a plan just to please an auditor. Be honest about the things that you have to do and the resources you have available. Known resource shortfalls can be dealt with through the planning process. Resource

shortfalls that are hidden with an unrealistic plan will come back to haunt you in a crisis.

7. **Exercise your plan.** If you haven't tested it, it's not real!

One final thought. The idea that every bit of information needed in a crisis can be contained in a single plan is a myth. A plan is part of a system that consists of many other elements such as supporting plans, operating guides, and training. Having a plan is like having that toolbox – it looks good and serviceable but if you lack the training and operating manuals needed to use those tools, you're not going to make that car go! 

Upcoming Appearances

Here is a list of my upcoming speaking engagements. Please drop by if you're in the area!

- March 30 – *Private Sector Risk Management ABCs* – [National Hurricane Conference](#), Orlando FL
- May 17 – *Emergency Preparedness for the Developmentally Disabled Community - Developmental Disabilities Nurses Association*, Reno NV

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