



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 company, Mr. Canton served as the Director of Emergency Services for the city and county of 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 the development of effective solutions to crisis planning.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC)
783 45th Ave
San Francisco, CA 94121
415.221.2562
415.520.5218
LCanton@LucienCanton.com
WWW.LucienCanton.com

Lessons from the Past

Remembering the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake

This Saturday, October 17th, is the 20th anniversary of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

For those of us in the San Francisco Bay Area, it's a time a remembrance and reflection. There are a number of big events going on, such as the statewide earthquake drill on October 15th, and the newspapers and news stations are full of stories related to either the Loma Prieta earthquake or the earthquake risk in the Bay Area.

Rather than telling my Loma Prieta story, I thought I'd share some the lessons I learned from the event. It was not my first disaster – I'd been involved in brush fires in California, a flood in Arizona and winter storms in New Jersey – but it was my first as an emergency management professional. At the time, I was assigned to FEMA as a military reservist. I spent the first three days following the earthquake working with the San Francisco emergency operations center and then was assigned to help set up the Disaster Field Office.

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

1. The severity of the 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 actually exciting. I didn't really focus on what had just happened 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. Sometimes it's the dedication of one person that makes the difference. One of the things we forgot in San Francisco was the generator that kept our public safety radio system working. No one was assigned to make sure that it had enough fuel and kept running. Fortunately, one of the staff knew the system well and knew what could happen if it failed. He went to the remote generator site without instructions and kept it running until commercial power was restored. It was months before anyone realized what he had done and how he had averted a serious problem.

3. You have to think beyond the short-term. It wasn't too long into the evening before we began to get calls for fuel for generators. The shortage had several causes. Some folks 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. There's a real need to consider all 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 supplies because the pumps were dependent on electricity.
 5. People 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 tow truck and the five junker 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 pretty 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 assumed that when a jurisdiction did not check in with them, they were okay and didn't need help. The situation turned out to be exactly the opposite.
 8. Recovery and mitigation take years. We have a tendency to focus on response but the real goal has to be recovery. When I became Director of Emergency Services for San Francisco in 1996, we still had open claims with FEMA. And after twenty years, we're still working on replacing the section of the Bay Bridge that was damaged in 1989.
- There is another lesson I've learned and it's been in my mind for the past week or so. We have a tendency to focus on what I call "the flavor of the month" – the disaster that is the current focus of media-driven public concern. Lately that's been primarily slow-onset events such as pandemic flu and hurricanes. We're also getting ready for the flood season here in California which is also a slow-onset event. However, the recent tsunami in American Samoa, coming as it did so close to the anniversary of Loma Prieta, is a good reminder that we have to be ready for the unexpected.

Training Opportunities

There are some great training opportunities coming up over the next few weeks that you may want to check out.

H1N1 and Beyond Conference

My colleague, Frank Perlmutter, from Strategic BCP, has put together a conference that looks beyond the health issues of H1N1 and focuses on business response to and recovery from H1N1. The conference will be in Santa Clara, CA on October 27 and in Chicago, IL on November 12. I'll be one of the speakers at the Santa Clara conference. More details can be found at [Strategic BCP](#)

Readers of this newsletter can get a small discount by registering with the discount code: LCCA (case sensitive).

IAEM Conference

If you're an emergency management professional, you really should attend the International Association of Emergency Managers conference in Orlando, FL the first week of November.

Can't swing the travel budget because of the economic downturn? Not to worry. This year IAEM is offering a live webcast from the conference for only \$179 (\$149 for members). That includes on-demand access after the conference is over. It's got to be one of the best web training deals around!

You can get more information [here](#)

Emergency Management Program Fundamentals

If you're attending the IAEM conference, I'm offering a four hour pre-conference workshop that will provide a step-by-step approach to developing your emergency management program. We'll covers topics such as understanding the evolving role of the emergency manager, demonstrating the value of your program, developing a program mission and vision, building a strong program framework with an administrative plan, and making progress through strategic planning. Course materials include a copy of my book *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs*.

You can sign up on the [IAEM website](#).

Technology Gone Wild?

My tech guru keeps trying to bring me into the 21st Century, so I'm now on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). If you feel so inclined, drop on by and sign up. I'm not sure where it's all going but it'll be fun finding out.

By the way, lest you think this is just me trying to look hi-tech, check out this [video on social media](#) sent to me by my colleague, Chris Godley. It's scary!

And just a reminder to you procrastinators - I've had to change my original blog site so if you haven't changed your RSS feed to the new site, you're missing some good stuff. You missed, for example, what Talk Like A Pirate Day and Emperor Norton have in common with emergency management. You can sign up for the feed on the [Free Resources](#) section of my website. 