



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 helping managers lead better in crisis.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC)  
783 45<sup>th</sup> Ave  
San Francisco, CA 94121  
415.221.2562  
415.520.5218 FAX  
LCanton@LucienCanton.com  
www.LucienCanton.com

## Paper Plans and Fantasy Documents

### *Are we over-thinking planning?*

Over the years I've reviewed countless emergency operations plans from multiple levels of government and within the private sector. Most of the time, I'm asked to assess these plans for compliance with Federal or state guidance. It's rare that I'm asked to comment on whether the plan will work. That's probably a good thing as most of the plans I see are rubbish.

In his seminal book **DISASTER RESPONSE: PRINCIPLES OF PREPARATION AND COORDINATION**, Eric Auf der Heide devotes an entire chapter to what he calls the "Paper Plan Syndrome", the tendency to believe that because one has a written plan, one is prepared. Lee Clarke notes in his book **MISSION IMPROBABLE: USING FANTASY DOCUMENTS TO TAME DISASTER** that many plans are symbols that organizations use to signal that they are in control of danger, whether they are or not.

The problem with these types of plans is that they are unrealistic because the organization lacks the resources to implement them. In some cases this is because the

organization has not done the necessary planning for implementation. In others, it's because the organization has used flawed planning assumptions.

Unfortunately, in our rush to standardize emergency planning, we have encouraged the development of these types of plans. We assess plans against guidance that factors in all possible tasks an organization may be asked to perform rather than considering the unique risks and circumstances of each organization.

### **Is it really all-hazards planning?**

One of the *Principles of Emergency Management* is Comprehensiveness, the need to account for all hazards, phases, stakeholders, and impacts of disasters. However, that does not mean that an emergency plan must address all of these things in a single document. Rather, an effective plan allows the organization to react to a crisis by gathering situational information, making decisions, and allocating resources. The emphasis should be on relationships and processes that enhance flexibility and creativity not on rigid organizational structures.

As an example of what I'm talking about, I recently reviewed a plan for a small jurisdiction in Southern California. It was well done and complied with all the relevant guidance. In many respects it was the same plan that was in use by much larger jurisdictions. However, the jurisdiction has only 36 public employees and relies on the county for many services. So what was the point of preparing a 100+ page plan with lengthy checklists for positions that would most likely never be filled?

Consider the emergency support function concept that is now in vogue. The concept is a good planning tool and I have seen it work well in large jurisdictions and Federal operations. But the reality is that a small jurisdiction will be lucky to get a single representative from each agency who will wear many hats. So why should they develop an organization chart showing all the support functions with primary and supporting agencies?

My point is not to discourage detailed planning but rather to raise the question of how we prioritize planning. My experience is that many organizations focus on developing a basic plan that essentially mimics Federal guidance (I sometimes get the feeling that there is just one plan and we all just copy it.) but seldom have the resources to develop all the detailed supporting plans needed to implement this basic plan.

### **A better approach?**

We need to shift the emphasis in our planning from a plan-centric approach to one that encourages organizations to actually manage crisis. One way to do this is to recognize that there are core functions that must be accomplished by even the smallest jurisdictions. These should emphasize population protection

functions such as warning and evacuation, sheltering and immediate care. For many small jurisdictions focusing on these core functions, would mean applying limited resources where they could do the most good for the maximum number of people.

Larger jurisdictions with more resources to spend should be focused not only on core functions but on more detailed planning and contingency planning. For example, while a small jurisdiction meet not be able to meet its sheltering needs without outside assistance, a larger jurisdiction might be able to do so. However, instead of planning for multiple annexes, why not focus on those most closely allied with the community's risks? Should you be spending time developing a terrorism annex or a sheltering annex that incorporates functional needs? It's easy to say, "Both" but planning resources are limited.

For the largest jurisdictions, we can add regional planning to core functions and detailed contingency plans. Large jurisdictions will be a source of resources for smaller jurisdictions and so must prepare not only to deal with their own crises but to provide mutual aid assistance to an entire region.

How would you manage such a process centrally? I'm not sure you could. But that is part of our problem: we feel the need to make sure everyone is doing the same thing in the same way because it is easy to assess. The incentive to comply has been Federal grant dollars. Maybe it is time to try a standards-based approach such as the Emergency Management Accreditation Program coupled with a peer-assessed exercise. Whichever way we go, we need to get away from basing our assessment of readiness on plans that have limited chance of success. 