



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 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

Simplify Your Planning

“Doorstop plans” are a waste of time

Research shows that few people read plans during a time of crisis. So why do we commit our limited resources to great massive documents crammed with details that no one will use or remember when it counts? The answer, sadly is that we write our plans to meet the requirements of others rather than the needs of those who must implement them. We demonstrate our adherence to “guidance” and our commitment to special interest groups by including specific language and annexes rather than actually crafting a response mechanism that will work when needed.

The problem is that, like so much of our emergency management programs, much of our planning has evolved over time to meet the crisis of the month rather than as the result of a systematic approach. While we understand that the relationships we forge during the planning process are more important than the written plan, the emphasis has been on the written plan as the metric for success.

Begin with Risk Analysis

While our plans include pages of information on potential hazards, they actually don’t factor into the

plan itself. They are usually taken from other documents and used to demonstrate that we have considered “all hazards” in our planning.

The problem is that “all-hazards planning” is a misnomer. We don’t really plan for hazards; we plan for the impact of those hazards on our communities. That impact depends on community vulnerability, so merely listing hazards and then lifting checklists from plan templates doesn’t have any correlation between threat and response.

Rather than trying to list every possible hazard, we need to consider enough hazards to identify a range of potential impacts. To narrow the field a bit, consider first those events most likely to occur that would require a coordinated response beyond that with which departments usually deal e.g. a simple car accident versus a multi-vehicle accident on the highway requiring a mass casualty response. Secondly, consider those low-frequency-high impact events that have historically occurred or have a reasonable probability of occurring. Discard the possible but not probable. You can always come back to these later but take care of first things first.

Functional-based Planning

Once you've identified potential impacts, you can convert those impacts into specific needs which in turn identify the functions that will be needed to meet those needs. Needs can be divided into two categories: needs that will remain essentially the same in every disaster and those that will vary based on the type of disaster, referred to by Enrico Quarentelli as response generated and agent generated needs.

Since response generated needs tend to stay the same in most disasters, they form the basis for "all-hazards" planning in the sense that the functions to be performed can be used in all disasters. For example, shelter operations are usually done the same way regardless of the cause of the disaster. There may be adjustments made at the time such as deciding which shelters may or may not be used but the process of opening the shelters and providing relief services will remain constant.

Because these demands remain constant we can pre-plan them using functional-based planning. Continuing with the shelter example, we can designate lead and supporting agencies, identify potential shelter locations, and stockpile resources. It is this detailed planning that is most useful to responders yet there seems to be an overwhelming emphasis on constantly rewriting base plans and reorganizing the emergency operations center rather than doing the difficult interagency planning needed to develop a useful annex.

One of the advantages of basing planning on potential need is that it is relatively simple to identify gaps in capability. These gaps can then become the focus of future planning.

Scenario-based Planning

Where response generated needs remain constant, agent generated needs are determined by the specific cause of the disaster. For example, the deployment of resources to deal with a conflagration will be different from that in a winter storm. An unexpected terrorist attack must be handled differently than a slow-onset disaster such as a hurricane.

This is where scenario planning can be useful. However, effective scenario-based planning depends on the assumptions being made about the event. The more detailed information available, the better the plan. This is why planning the evacuation of a clearly identified dam inundation zone will be more effective than planning for a general terrorist attack with no known target.

Further, not every hazard needs a specific plan. Part of your assessment of planning needs should be whether or not the particular event can be handled through functional plans. In other words, what makes the event unique? Why does it require a special planning effort? As in everything you do in planning, you need to prioritize your efforts.

Planning is a Continuous Process

One of the great fallacies that we have accepted is that the mere existence of a plan is proof that we are ready for crisis. The simple fact is that most plans are too complex and contain too much extraneous material to be useful. Moreover, planning is a continuous process, particularly for agent generated needs. To be effective, planning must be based on the impacts of potential disasters, something that will vary by community. This is one time where "one size fits all" just doesn't work. 