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The Strategic Plan

Getting the Most Out of Your Program

If I were to ask you if you have an emergency management program, what would you say? Most of the people I meet are quick to respond, "Well, of course!" However, the most common problem I find in both the public and private sectors is the lack of two basic pieces of program documentation: an administrative plan and a strategic plan. I suggest that without these two documents, you really don't have a program, just a collection of tasks and requirements.

The administrative plan documents the governance structure of your program. It describes the membership and authority of your advisory group or planning team, the source of your program funding, how often you meet, how you communicate, and how you make decisions. In short, it answers the question. "Who are we?"

The strategic plan documents what you are trying to accomplish with your program. As such, it serves as an agreement among participants in the strategy, a tool to keep the program on track, and a yardstick to measure progress.

The strategic plan is without a doubt the most important component of

your program. It should be the centerpiece of your program, not your operational plans. The strategic plan creates the context that allows operational plans to be effective.

Making Decisions

Peter Drucker in [*Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*](#) defined the strategic plan as a continuous process by which we make decisions, organize our efforts to carry out those decisions, and measure our results. The concept is simple, the execution is not.

Most of the difficulty comes, as one would expect, in the decision-making phase of the process. Part of the problem is that we are used to thinking in terms of deliverables such as grant requirements rather than in terms of results. To be effective, the strategic plan must be focused on results, not deliverables. Deliverables are a means of achieving results, not an end in themselves.

Our first decisions, therefore, should be about what our organization is seeking to achieve. These decisions are usually expressed as goals or general objectives: short statements that provide broad guidance and direction and can be used in planning for the future.

This process involves listing the tasks required by law or by legal obligations. It also considers those things that may not be required but are considered either essential or desirable by the organization. This analysis identifies what is required of the organization. It also offers a degree of leverage that helps in pushing back against unfunded mandates or in helping to decide whether to accept a grant.

Organizing efforts

Once we understand the goals or general objectives for our organization, we can determine what needs to be done to achieve them. These efforts are usually expressed as objectives. Unfortunately, this where many strategic plans stop. Simply listing goals and objectives does not make a strategic plan anything more than a paper plan. To achieve progress, your objectives should be performance objectives. Performance objectives are a required element of program management under NFPA 1600 *Standard on Continuity, Emergency, and Crisis Management*.

Where a goal or general objective is broad, a performance objective is specific and measurable. An effective performance objective includes the following elements:

- *Definition* – this is a description of the specific task that needs to be accomplished. For example, if my goal is to reduce vulnerability through effective mitigation, my first objective might be to conduct a hazard analysis, my second to develop a mitigation plan, and so on.
- *Metric* – How will you know when you have met your objective? For example, completion of a plan could be determined by approval of an elected body, upon acceptance by FEMA, after validation in an

exercise, etc. Which is acceptable to your planning team?

- *Action agent* – Who will accomplish the task? Ideally this should be a single individual or department, even if others are involved. It's hard to hold a group accountable; someone needs to accept responsibility for the task.
- *Timeline* – When will the task be accomplished? This is particularly important if you're proposing a multi-year project.

Many strategic plans stop with these four elements. However, if you think about it a bit, you'll notice that this is just a more detailed list of goals and objectives with no real substance. To be truly effective, a performance objective must include the following:

- *Cost* – The first question your executive team will always ask you will be, "What will this cost?" If you can't answer this question, at least in broad terms, you won't be taken seriously.
- *Funding source* – The second question you will always be asked is, "How will we pay for this?" If you can't suggest potential sources of funding, your objective is not feasible.

Measuring results

One of the benefits of the strategic plan is that it can be used as a program management tool. You can build milestones into the timelines of your performance objectives and monitor progress. At the end of the planning year, you can use the plan as a quantitative assessment tool to measure the percentage of completion of your objectives.

If we are to be truly emergency managers, then the strategic plan is an indispensable tool.

Without it you really don't have a program. 