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Sustained Operations

With over nine months of COVID response I am sure that many of my colleagues have relearned the painful lessons associated with sustained operations. The simple fact is that many crises are of limited duration and it is possible for emergency operations center staff to “power through” the response. But when the situation is long or of uncertain duration, such as the winter storms that we can anticipate, the dynamic changes.

I thought that it might be helpful to recall some of the lessons I have learned about sustained operations from my time with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, particularly those concerning people.

Granted, operations in a regional operations center or a Joint Field Office are not quite the same as those in an EOC. However, there are parallels with levels of intensity and shifting priorities. Think of it in terms of a business requirement to establish a corporate office and multiple branches within a week and then to sustain that organization through a growth phase and eventual downsizing. Priorities and operational tempo will change overtime and the need to adapt will be critical.

Operational Tempo

Every operation has its own tempo, ranging from the intense demands of immediate response to the relatively more leisurely pace of long-term recovery operations. Recognizing this tempo, (or “battle rhythm” as has become the more popular term) and understanding how it changes over time is key to adjusting EOC staffing to meet changing demands.

Typically, EOCs run on 8-12-hour operational periods, with 12 hours being more usual. This is appropriate in the response phase but may become excessive over time. Do you really need full staffing on a night shift? Do you even really need a night shift? You need to be able to adjust staffing to meet demand rather than just filling out an organizational chart.

Part of understanding operational tempo is recognizing the need to adjust the skill sets within your staff. As important as the Comprehensive Emergency Management model is, it was never meant to be operationalized so building your staffing plan around the four phases of preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation doesn't work. Instead, recognize that that disasters consist of overlapping phases that change over time.

Stress Management

During the Oakland-Berkeley Hills fire in 1991, my colleague, Ken Chin, and I recommended using volunteers from a local massage therapy school to provide neck and shoulder massages. While our recommendation was not taken, several years later FEMA began placing teams of stress counselors in our field offices. After an initial period during which they were not taken seriously, they proved highly effective in both providing staff training in recognizing and reducing stress and in helping to identify people needing assistance. Consider reaching out to your public health department for helping in managing stress in your EOC.

Staffing Issues

Short of adding stress counselors to your staff, there are many things you can do to reduce stress on your staff. One of the things I learned in the military and private security is that personnel effectiveness falls off rapidly after 12 hours. The initial emotional response to a crisis is often referred to as the “heroic phase” and it is not uncommon to hear stories of responders who have gone days without sleep. However, this is not sustainable and is not something you want to see in the people making critical response decisions.

The solution to the “heroic phase” is to set work schedules and stick to them. On more than one occasion I have had to order staff to leave a field office or EOC and go get some rest.

Closely allied to this issue is the one of crew rotation. ICS overhead teams generally rotate out after 21 days. This not only brings a fresh team but also fresh perspectives. With thin staff, a full rotation may not be possible but ensuring periodic days off should be. My rule of thumb was a mandatory half day off after two

weeks and a full day off starting the third. I also reduce shifts to 10 hours as soon as possible.

While EOC staff are usually limited in size, they can be augmented. EOC operations expand during a major crisis and you will need more staff. In California, all public employees are classified as Disaster Service Workers which allows them to be used as needed in a disaster.

FEMA’s model was to initiate operations with a team of agency employees and on-call reservists and then to locally hire additional staff. This provided an economic benefit to the local community and brought a local perspective to our operations. If operational procedures are well laid out, local hires can be trained very quickly. My “ah ha!” moment came during Hurricane Iniki in 1992 when a Forest Service ICS team trained my team of local hires in planning unit duties in less than one day.

Transitioning

One way of rotating staff is to recognize when there is a shift in priorities that generates a need for new skill sets. For example, while recovery and continuity tasks and issues do occur in the early phase of a crisis, the emphasis is on immediate response. As immediate response needs are met, the staff devoted to these tasks can be downsized and that devoted to recovery increased as needed.

Ultimately, the success of sustained operations is about managing personnel resources. Effective management maximizes available personnel resources while ensuring that staff are sufficiently rested to perform their duties. Exhausted people make bad decisions and stress can produce long term health issues for your staff. In a crisis, your people are your most valuable asset and need to be safeguarded. 