

## Train for Leadership

### *Why our plans fail to prepare our leaders*



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Last month I discussed the difficulties in transitioning from a technician to a program manager. Two of the points that I raised were that technicians are taught that there is a best answer to every problem and the technicians tend to favor tasks over outcomes.

This month I'd like to expand on those points a bit further and discuss how this mindset affects our planning and may actually hinder our ability to deal effectively with crisis.

#### **Do we even need plans?**

One question that rarely gets asked is why we need a plan in the first place. People have been dealing with crisis for centuries without plans, sometimes with impressive results. So what is the value of a plan?

The answer, as we've all been told in the hoary old quote from Eisenhower, is that the plan itself is of limited value; that planning itself is important. We assume that pre-planning translates to better crisis management.

If this underlying assumption is valid (and I believe it is), why is our planning emphasis on the

development of plans rather than on the development of capability?

By capability I am not referring to the technical aspects embodied in the *Target Capabilities List*. I refer instead to the skills required by a crisis management team to actual deal with crisis, the ability to:

- realize a crisis is occurring
- collect and analyze information required for informed decision making
- make decisions rapidly
- implement decisions through resource allocation
- provide effective crisis communications

Of these basic skills, the one I find most lacking is the ability to make decisions under pressure with limited information. In other words, we simply do not train our senior executives to lead in crisis. There are many reasons for this failure. Gaining the participation of senior executives in pre-planning is always a challenge. However, I believe that part of the fault lies with a planning methodology that does not engage them.

## Why the deck is stacked against you

Just what is wrong with our planning? First is the overwhelming emphasis on the plan as a measure of preparedness. Following Hurricane Katrina the Federal government conducted a series of National Plan Reviews to determine the level of readiness throughout the United States. Since these reviews were based on Federal planning guidance, they had the effect of creating de facto standards. By the second plan review, most state and jurisdictional plans looked very much like the guidance and even used the same language.

The problem does not lie with the planning guidance, much of which is actually very well done. What creates the problem is that jurisdictions are developing plans not on the basis of local risks and capabilities but are instead writing plans to meet perceived national requirements. The result is a plan that in most cases is not particularly relevant to the jurisdiction but is done the “right” way (technician thinking).

The second problem with our planning is the tendency to include everything in one plan on the theory that it makes it easier to check. In *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs* I discuss the concept of a plan hierarchy. Simply put, this concept suggests that plans are written for different purposes and the content must be appropriate to the user level. Giving your senior executive a plan containing too much tactical detail will ensure that it never gets read.

However, the detailed plan that includes strategic, operational, and tactical level information is strongly encouraged by both Federal guidance and the system we have

developed to measure preparedness via plans. In typical technician fashion, our plans must include all the tasks we may be called upon to perform. They fail to ask the basic questions about who will use the plan and what the purpose of the plan is.

## Turning things around

Unfortunately, the system is so strongly entrenched that changing it unilaterally is difficult. Many of the worst elements of our flawed planning system are imbedded in both Federal and local guidance documents that are perceived as mandatory. But there are a few things you can do to turn things around.

- Maintain your focus on your organizational needs. Resist the urge to use boilerplate language unless it is appropriate. Keep your plan realistic. You can only do this by involving your stakeholders. It’s called planning!
- Make sure you know the difference between actual requirements and perceived requirements. Many planners make assumptions about requirements that aren’t true (e.g. mirroring the National Response Framework or using the Emergency Support Function concept).
- Emphasize team building and decision making in your exercises. You *can* train leadership but it requires some thought and slight changes to our typical exercises.
- Above all, stop thinking like a technician and limiting yourself to getting the tasks right. Managers are evaluated on outcomes. Ultimately our success is not measured by how well the plan is written but how well we were able to deal with a crisis. 