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Why Are You Writing This Plan?

Why Plans Don't Work as Intended

Imagine you are participating in a sporting event that has a high risk of injury and high stakes. You have some familiarity with the sport and the necessary equipment but you're no expert. As you arrive on the playing field, your coach hands you on three-inch-thick rule book and says, "Everything you need to know is in here."

You've seen the book before, but never really read it. You open it and try to quickly skim to the parts that involve your position. But you're having problems locating all the information you need. As you are desperately searching through all the material in the book, the starting whistle blows and the opposing team charges onto the field. Ready or not, the game is on.

Sounds dumb, doesn't it? Yet this is the scene that is played out in emergency operations centers on a regular basis. Bottrell's Third Law of Emergency Management states, "No matter who you train, someone else will show up." Handing that poor devil a copy of the emergency plan and immediately tossing them into operations is a recipe for failure.

But why is this so? Surely, as our mythical coach pointed out, everything we need to know is in the plan. That may well be true, but it does no good if you can't find the information you need quickly. Unfortunately, most plans are not written for the person who must use them.

What is a plan?

It is important to distinguish between planning, the process by which we determine strategies and relationships, and a plan, which is the documentation of planning. Planning is a continuous process where a plan is essentially a snapshot of where the planning process was at a particular time.

The problem with this documentation is that it can serve multiple purposes and have separate and distinct target audiences. We have never developed a common taxonomy for plans.

Take, for example, the difference between the emergency action plan required under OSHA and the emergency operations plan called for in CPG 101 *Developing and Maintaining Emergency Operations Plans*. They have similar names, but one is a tactical plan aimed at individuals while the other is

an operational plan intended to coordinate the activities of multiple agencies. One provides very specific information to the user while the other assumes the existence of supporting plans and procedures.

Who is the Audience?

In addition to confusion over taxonomy, there is confusion over the target audience for different types of plans. If we consider the typical emergency operations plan, much of the information in the plan is not there for the user but rather to satisfy the requirements of others. This tends to feed into what sociologist Lee Clarke refers to as a "fantasy document", one that demonstrates preparedness through the mere *existence* of a plan, regardless of its effectiveness.

The classic example is the requirement for many plans to include a summary of the incident command system. If a person arriving at the EOC has not already been trained in ICS, will reading 10 pages of text while under pressure really be of any use? Clearly this requirement is there to demonstrate to an outsider, *other than the user*, that the jurisdiction is using ICS. It may also serve as a training tool. But it's not there for the user.

Why is this important? Knowing the intended use of the plan drives content. A document intended to meet a grant requirement requires information not needed at the time of crisis. A plan written at the operational level will focus more on relationships and coordination than a plan written for the tactical level. Tactical level plans require a higher degree of granularity and focus on specific elements such as a department or task force.

What does the user need?

The needs of the user of the plan should drive the content of the plan. An effective plan should anticipate what the user needs to perform assigned tasks and presents that in an accessible format. Ask yourself the question, "If I were seeing this plan for the first time under time constraints, what do I need to know?" Background information, the "why", is not as important in a crisis as the "what" and "how".

Social science research suggests that plans are generally not consulted at the time of crisis. However, tools such as checklists, flow charts, maps, and diagrams may be. If the information can be easily located and is an accessible format, it has a better chance of being used.

Can A Plan Have Multiple Uses?

I am not advocating separate plans for different audiences. However, direct parts of a plan to specific audiences. For example, if your basic plan is written for auditors and the public, don't bury important information like the location of the EOC where it is hard to find. Use techniques like call outs and detailed tables of contents.

Supporting annexes sometimes suffer from too much verbiage. Short paragraphs using simple language, supplemented by graphic aids, are more useful than page after page of dense text. Hazard specific appendices shouldn't reiterate information already available elsewhere but should focus on the unique response requirements of the hazard.

The key to a successful emergency plan is simplicity: simplicity in concept, simplicity of use. You can't always control who will show up at your game, but you can give them a shot at success by making it easier to play.