

Integrating Theory into Practical Emergency Management

(A follow-up to “Groundwork for an Emergency Management Model”)

Article - May/June 2009 IACLEA’s Campus Law Enforcement Journal

Theory without practice is lame, and practice without theory is blind. This is an old saying, but it bears repeating because too many emergency managers are inclined to dismiss academic research as “ivory tower” abstraction. They do not realize that the best research in emergency management is essentially the study of past and current practices, conducted for the sake of establishing clearer principles and strategies for the improvement of future practices and standards. Practitioners who are unwilling to make use of the theory of emergency management are, in a sense, ignoring the important lessons of the vocation itself. Since this neglect compromises planning and undermines institutional resilience from within, it should perhaps be considered more hazardous than any other human-caused hazard. That said, it is unhelpful to advise the majority of emergency managers not holding graduate degrees in social science to devote significant time and energy to the perusal and application of research while additionally carrying out a full range of professional responsibilities. Neither is it helpful merely to recommend a degree of familiarity with current scholarship, since cursory knowledge can lead to greater error than no knowledge. It is crucial that emergency managers exploit the resources of academic learning, but how they are to accomplish this difficult task has yet to be established.

Emergency management has evolved since its beginnings in civil defense, when professional expertise was defined in terms of military and emergency service experience. Increasingly, academic training is replacing the technical training of the past, and this shift in the foundation of the discipline is reflected in the recent rise of graduate programs offering social science degrees in the study of disaster and emergency management. “One of the hallmarks of a profession,” says Canton, “is a specialized and theoretical body of knowledge,” but “for much of its history, the emergency management discipline has considered this specialized body of knowledge to be the skills relating to emergency response” (38). These skills alone, essential as they are for emergency operations and tactics, are not suitable requirements for a professional emergency manager: “The theoretical knowledge that forms the basis of emergency management lies not in these technical skills but in social science research and a deeper understanding of the nature of disaster and the reaction of people and organizations to crisis” (38).

As long as researched-based theoretical knowledge is omitted from planning, avoidable disasters will continue to occur. Practice without theory has many pitfalls, some of which were discussed in the previous article. There we considered the deleterious consequences of relying on paper plans instead of institution-wide synergistic planning, and we discussed how planners who follow disaster trends can develop an event-driven perspective that undermines their ability to anticipate objectively. We also explained how, contrary to popular belief, those who are in the best position to anticipate an impending crisis are the personnel at the operational level of an institution. Finally, we considered the benefits of replacing the hierarchical “command and control” planning model with a more synergistic “top down, bottoms-up” model.

In order to gain a greater sense of the value of the social sciences to emergency management there are some further points to consider. The lack of a social science perspective of human behavior during a crisis perpetuates myths. An example is that victims of a disaster are commonly thought to be “prone to panic and to reverting to a more savage, self-centered nature, leading to a breakdown of social order and criminal activity” (53). Similarly, there is the belief that victims of a disaster are shocked into passivity, severely traumatized, and unable to care for themselves. Research shows, however, that in a crisis people generally “become focused on loved ones and neighbors and become extremely creative in dealing with the problems generated by a disaster” (53). From the onset of a crisis, people undertake rescue, assist the injured, self-evacuate, and provide ample assistance to first responders: “Almost 90 percent of disaster victims are rescued by private individuals, not by public agencies” (53). These facts provide incentive for managers to establish synergy at all levels of their institution by harnessing the capabilities of human behavior during a disaster.

There is also the widespread misconception that when a disaster strikes, strict adherence to a contingency plan will automatically lead to success. But the environment associated with the response period of a disaster is “characterized by change, uncertainty, and a sense of urgency in which communications and decision-making systems may break down and standard operating procedures may not apply” (Lewis 174). Furthermore, as Moore and Lakha point out, humans are “not particularly good at the kind of inspiration that is needed sometimes in emergencies. One reason for this is that when operating in stressful situations, they tend to follow a pattern of pre-programmed responses. But these are ‘shaped by personal history’ and tend ‘to reflect patterns of past experience’” (333). The way to build adaptability and improvisation in an institution is to reshape the personal history and past experiences of its members through education and training.

The importance of scholarship to the discipline of emergency management cannot be overstated; however, the problem of integration has yet to be addressed. One suggestion that frequently appears in books and journals is to envision the emergency manager as a kind of Renaissance man. According to Drabek, emergency managers should be polymaths, adept at shifting focus from one discipline to another “without becoming overwhelmed by the scope and complexity of the issues” (39). Thus “with the image of a kaleidoscope as their model” emergency managers “can better design and implement an integrated program that will advance the emerging profession of emergency management. . . . And equally important, they can better conceptualize their relationships with other professionals, be they medical, fire service, law enforcement, social services, or what you have. In short, they can better conceptualize the pathways flowing from and toward specific academic disciplines on whose research they must depend for the scientific knowledge in which the profession must remain grounded” (39). With due deference to Professor Drabek, we think that this advice casts the emergency manager in the role of both scholar and practitioner, and therefore does not provide a feasible solution to the problem of integration, because most emergency managers are not scholars, nor should they be. Emergency management comprises a spectrum of roles, many of which are administrative. Supervision and coordination are as important to the discipline as research and development.

Instead of placing excessive demands on the majority of emergency managers, we recommend the creation of a medium between the two vocations, so that managers can benefit from the innovations derived from theory without having to stretch the scope of their responsibilities and dilute their expertise. Our first step was to compose a theoretical model based on the best practices and principles established by the social sciences. This model identifies the elements that are essential to a comprehensive emergency management system. It requires, for example, that the system comply with all standards, guidelines, and best practices; address all hazards; establish a high level of intra- and inter-agency collaboration, as well as interoperability with external communication systems; provide timely and accurate information for the prioritization of resources; facilitate leadership, vision, and direction at the executive level of the institution, and allow for the upward flow of information and expertise from departments and faculties; improve anticipation through human intelligence gathering; have an accountability system; provide timely budget information; be flexible enough to allow for improvisation and adaptation; provide training and exercises; and be user friendly. With this theoretical model in place, our second step was to develop an all-phase planning system that acts as an interface between scholarship and practice, so that the best advice on how to

proceed in customizing and invoking plans is available to both emergency managers and practitioners directly and at every stage of the process.

In order to test the comprehensiveness of our emergency management model and the capabilities of the planning system, Challenging Risk Inc. has created campus-specific software, which is currently in the final stage of development and is being implemented at a large, world-class university, where it is already showing favorable results. In offering at once a theoretical and practical solution to the issue of integrating theory and practice, we hope to advance the development of the emergency management profession further towards the goal of becoming a craft with a scientific foundation.

Works Cited

Canton, Lucien. *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs*. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2007.

Drabek, Thomas. "Emergency Management and Homeland Security Curricula: Contexts, Cultures, and Constraints." *Journal of Emergency Management*. 5.4 (2007): 33-42.

Moore, Tony and Raj Lakha. *Tolley's Handbook of Disaster and Emergency Management*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2006.

Lewis, Ralph. "Management Issues in Emergency Response." *Managing Disaster*. Ed. Louise K. Comfort. Durham: Duke University Press, 1988.