

Groundwork for an Emergency Management Model

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While developing campus police directives, our team at Challenging Risk Inc. gathered extensive information about the state of emergency planning in leading colleges and universities. Our research revealed a number of issues regarding emergency and disaster preparation. Three in particular stood out: 1) Administrators succumb to what some scholars refer to as the "paper plan syndrome," an illusion of preparedness characterized by the reliance on official written plans in the place of institution-wide synergistic planning. 2) Planning tends to reflect an event-driven perspective that narrows the scope of anticipation to a specific hazard or threat, whereas objectivity rather than hindsight is essential to resilience. 3) Inadequate planning is frequently attributable to the disconnection between the theoretical sphere of the emergency management scholar and the practical sphere of campus emergency managers and planning teams. Based on the findings, our team is creating a model of emergency management that can address the concerns currently facing campuses as well as concerns yet to be considered. This short article stems from the groundwork of the model and recommends solutions to the first two problems that undermine resilience planning; the third requires special treatment and is reserved for the ensuing article.

The most widespread impediment to resilience planning is the lack of synergy, which is a low level or absence of community collaboration in the planning process. President Eisenhower said he always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable. In this sense, planning involves "bringing community elements together under a shared vision and the process of achieving this consensus is more important than the final end product" (Canton 223). The end product, or plan, should document the health of the planning process; hence, it is a useful supervisory tool for the emergency manager. Unfortunately, many managers and administrators have relied on paper plans as the foundation of their institution's preparedness to deal with disaster, and the consequences in some cases have been dire.

The reliance on paper plans is endemic to colleges and universities. After conducting a review of the crisis plans of several top universities, our researchers noticed that these plans were overarching, or general in scope and devoid of specifics. Some institutions had specific information on selected areas, buildings, and programs; however, the plans represented only a fraction of their operations, capabilities, and vulnerabilities. Many of the overarching plans required faculties and departments to create plans of their own, but no provisions were made to facilitate these requirements. We refer to this preference for the general over the specific as the

“one size fits all” version of the paper plan syndrome. It is prominent in environments where serious risks and threats are believed to be unlikely, in which case legal responsibility becomes the only strong motive for adopting an official plan. The absence of synergy that lies behind this façade of preparedness is evident in the case of one university in particular, which despite being in possession of official plans, failed to leverage the intelligence resources of key faculty personnel during a fire at its science building. As the fire raged, first responders were forced to standby, believing that the smoke from the fire was toxic. The professors in possession of this knowledge had not been assigned a function as part of the planning process, and therefore waited outside the perimeters of the disaster zone as the building burned.

As the last example shows, a critical part of synergy is inter-agency collaboration. Synergistic planning should facilitate “a communication capacity that enables separate public sector, private sector, and even non-profit agencies to organize themselves in a collaborative effort to coordinate the disaster response” (Collins, 19). Inter-agency collaboration requires, of course, that communications systems are interoperable. The failure of responding agencies to communicate is frequently attributed to the lack of interoperability; however, while this is often the case, it is erroneous to blame the problem on technology, because the problem is usually poor synergy. Agencies unable to communicate during the coordination of a disaster response have not collaborated in advance in order to converge on the provision of interoperable communications systems.

At the intra-agency level, many institutions fail to create a planning synergy between their various departments because they follow a paramilitary approach to emergency management. Drabek has criticized the paramilitary model, in which information flows principally from the top to the bottom of a command hierarchy. He has argued that superimposing a military structure on a non-military institution inevitably leads to problems, because unlike other institutions, “The very organization of the military is designed to develop, support, and implement rigidly formatted plans” (EMPP, 169). It is time for emergency managers to familiarize themselves with the paradigm shift recommended by recent research, which as Drabek states elsewhere, propounds “an alternative model, one that emphasizes cooperation, not command; coordination, not control” (JEM, 36). This new “bottoms-up perspective”, which stems from “research based critiques of command and control management models” (36), has yet to be fully embraced outside of the academy. The administration’s role in emergency planning should be leadership. Leadership comprises vision and mission statements, long range program goals, annual goals, provisions for evaluation, budget forecasts, and so on. But while administrative planners should focus on establishing the framework and overall goals for their

program, they also need to encourage the upward flow of information, knowledge, and expertise from departments or faculties. In a sense, many organizations already possess the most important information concerning their risks, threats, vulnerabilities, and capabilities; they only need to ask for it, and listen.

So far we have looked at synergy in terms of intra- and inter-agency planning, but it also must be understood in terms of inter-phase planning. The “all-hazards” approach to emergency management should also include an all-phases approach. Our researchers have found that emergency plans at most colleges and universities have been developed and implemented piecemeal, that is, in sections over an extended period, and often through the work of different planning teams. While this is understandable from a budgetary and staffing perspective, it does not result in an effective all-hazards, all-phases approach. A resilient institution should not only have a plan for each phase, but integrate each phase-specific plan into a comprehensive emergency management system that allows for a maximum amount of information to be shared between them.

Anticipation is the most significant component of efficient and cost-effective emergency management. An important benefit of the “top down, bottoms up” emergency planning system is the enhanced capacity for adaptive anticipation, since it recognizes the principle that anticipation begins at the operational level. As Erikson remarks, “Those who are in the best position to recognize the early and progressive warning signals of an impending crisis are precisely those people on-site where the emergency begins. Typically, these are not the personnel of some governmental agency or public emergency response service but, rather, the workers and administrators in the facility wherein the crisis begins or in the facility that may be affected by an out-of-control emergency that develops elsewhere” (54). It is unfortunate that many emergency managers and executive crisis planning teams, biased by trends that focus on recent disasters, are not responsive to the full range of information available from the operational levels of their institutions. Canton has insightfully illustrated how this tendency to prepare for the last disaster results in planners being “frequently surprised by events that were foreseeable but largely ignored because they did not have the visibility of the ‘popular’ hazards” (131).

Inter-agency collaboration is an indispensable means of anticipation, especially when a crisis affecting one institution poses potential future threats to a similar institution. The University of California, Berkeley recently experienced violent protests held by the Animal Liberation Front, which lead to incidents and assaults involving flooding, acid, and firebombs. The target of the protesters was animal research. Universities with similar research programs should not only

recognize their susceptibility to a similar attack, but also discuss the issue with the relevant personnel at Berkeley, who have learned valuable lessons from experience, and may provide information about hidden vulnerabilities as well as effective methods for controlling them. In sum, anticipation empowers prevention.

This essay discussed how synergy and anticipation are affected by the paper plan syndrome, intra- and inter-agency collaboration, and the “top-down, bottoms up” approach to planning. In our next article we will address the lack of synergy between theory and practice that is endemic to the world of emergency management, and prevents scholars and practitioners from engaging in productive and collaborative inter-professional communication.

Works Cited

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