

IAEM Disaster Zone Column
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It Begins and Ends with Relationships

In the past, if you asked any emergency manager about what the most important aspect of emergency management is and what makes the most difference in their programs, they likely would have said, "It is all about relationships."

I have a sense that perhaps the newest generation of professional emergency managers entering the field don't necessarily value the relationship proposition as much as their predecessors did.

There certainly are no statistics or surveys that I can cite, only personal observation. One possible explanation is that the newer emergency managers are coming into the profession with university level training in the area of emergency management. They have much more book knowledge of the emergency management subject area and it is only natural that they rely on their personal knowledge since that is what is valued in an educational setting.

Then there are all the federal requirements that come with strings attached concerning the administration of grant funds. Is everyone trained in Incident Command System (ICS) and the National Incident Management System (NIMS)? Are all the exercises being conducted according to Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP)? You can dot all the i's and cross all the t's, but is that what makes for a strong program?

Diane Newman, my former Deputy Director at King County pointed out to me that 20-30 years ago the majority of people entering the emergency management field were people coming from mid-career transitions. Fire, police and the military were all professional fields that saw significant numbers of people starting second careers in emergency management.

They came to the profession (which back then was not as professional) with practical knowledge that came from their individual work experiences and perhaps some tangential work with their state and local emergency management agencies. The way they learned about emergency management came from a few Federal Emergency Management Courses (FEMA) like the Professional Development Series (PDS) and on the job training.

They were also much more reliant on others they knew in the field for assistance with projects and knowledge. Relationships were much more important to them, since that is where their base of new knowledge and experience came from.

This dependence on relationships sometimes led to what was called “the good old boy network” for responding to disasters. Rather than following the normal chain of command for requesting resources in a disaster, they would rather call people who they knew for assistance, no matter where they were located. They could count on help being sent quickly. I’m not saying that it was right, but it did work, and they knew their request was not rotting in someone’s in-box at another level of government.

What about today? What role do relationships play in emergency management? Do we now have “systems of systems” that have replaced the need for one-to-one relationships?

When there is a cyber attack on your digital systems, does it help to know the information telecommunications director and staff as people, rather than just an email or phone number? When it comes to public-private partnerships, how do you get those started in your community? Might it be that before there can be information sharing or a partnership that first there must be a person-to-person relationship established?

I’m perhaps the wrong person to be writing a balanced column about the need for relationships. On a scale of 1-10 with ten being high, I’m an 11 when it comes to valuing personal relationships. This is not to denigrate the need for standards and processes, because they are needed. On that front I see a desperate need today for a functional logistics system to be in place between the levels of government. Without it we are doomed to fail when responding to major disasters.

Within emergency management, I call the changing faces of everyone you need to have a personal relationship with, “Emergency Manager’s Curse.” We live in a mobile society and when you finally have a strong relationship in place, that person retires, gets unelected, changes jobs or just moves on. Then you are often back to square one with having to start over to find the right person, from that organization—who is willing, to establish a personal relationship.

Sometimes I’ve found that the principle value I can bring to someone else is the network of personal relationships that I have with others across the spectrum of organizations in a region.

I’ll close with this. If you want to start strong in a relationship you need to work at it. Two things you can do. One I’ve faithfully done over the years is to send a handwritten card to everyone I meet. I include another business card in the envelope to seal the deal, since not everyone has a management system for the business cards they collect. The other is to offer value to that person with information that I come across or have access to that might be of some use to them. Both of these efforts are great ways to cultivate a future relationship.

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