

The new normal: A catalyst for leadership adaptation in a tumultuous world—Let's stop applying 20th century solutions to 21st century problems in emergency management

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The COVID-19 Pandemic continues to be one of the most formidable public health challenges in modern history. Amidst the backdrop of new variants of the SARS CoV-2 virus, the pandemic that everyone thought would be over in a year shows little signs of abatement.¹ Concurrently, the emergency management community globally have responded to an unprecedented number of crisis events. From March 2020 to September 2021, there have been sizeable disasters such as wildfires, hurricanes and tropical storms, earthquakes, and flooding. In addition, cyberattacks and terrorist activity have required additional manpower, management resources, and both the talent and funding to adequately study and train differently than we have to date.

In addition, September 11, 2021 will mark a somber occasion as America, its allies and enemies reflect on what has transpired over the past 20 years, with potentially seismic shifts in geopolitics on the horizon.²

The backdrop of climate, geopolitical, and social turmoil has profound implications for emergency managers. Twenty-first century threats are expected to be more complex and sometimes overlapping, calling for thinking, planning, and action more sophisticated than has been required in the past. To prepare both the current and future workforce effectively requires a new paradigm in terms of both

emergency and disaster management (EDM) education and policy.³

Both the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Emergency Management Institute (EMI) should take the lead in formulating a crisis task force to evaluate the current competency gaps in EDM leadership and define what education and training needs are now critical to overcome the serious gaps in knowledge, decision-making, coordination, and management leadership.⁴

EMI would find willing partners with the research community to assess the gaps and develop relevant curriculum recommendations that translate theory to practice resulting in improved coordinated management at all levels of society.

Competencies will need to be measured and evaluated to assess whether training curricula meets the operational and planning requirements of 21st century crises. Emergency Managers will need to show expertise in crisis leadership skills and multi-disciplinary collaboration across the entire disaster cycle (prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, rehabilitation) that transcend functional discipline-specific capabilities.⁵⁻⁷

There are several specific areas to be addressed that can significantly enhance both capacity and capability:

Multi-disciplinary collaboration: It is time to move beyond merely referring to other entities as “partners.” An appreciation for the need for each stakeholder to both master their lane and work well with others should be cultivated at every level of the profession. With complex crises, the assumption should be that no one has all of the answer while everyone may have part of the answer—from preparation through recovery. Such robust connectivity unlocks latent potential of underutilized (and sometimes unrecognized) assets. Coordinated training across various federal, state, and local agencies as well as with private sector and nonprofit entities provides an ideal environment for relationship building.⁵

Behavioral components of leadership: In one study of emergency management professionals from the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative at Harvard University, fewer than 25 percent of respondents had received any training in emotional intelligence, mindfulness, or other behavioral aspects of leading in their Incident Command System (ICS) or similar training. Yet, increasingly, leader behavior is seen as essential to effectiveness. The structural foundation for emergency management has been well-developed through ICS and National Incident Management System. Emergency management education should now embrace teaching how and when to perform as well as what to do within those structures to optimize performance.

Educate leaders beyond the classroom: Leading is an area where the complementary components of theory and practice can create a virtuous circle of learning. Traditional classroom learning still has a place, yet to develop leaders ready for complex crises, they must be made wiser, faster. That can be achieved through more systematic and intentional integration of internships, cross-agency assignments, and mentorships. How many in the profession hit the field only to hear, “Forget what they taught you at the academy. Let me show you how we really do it.”? That disconnect is an avoidable vulnerability that must be remedied.⁸

The multiplicity of significant threats along with the scope and scale of their consequences require

emergency managers to take the profession to a higher level. Now is the time to invest in developing the quality and quantity of leaders the future demands.⁹

To that end, we invite critical input from all stakeholders to address two key EDM priorities.

1. Creating a broad EDM research agenda driven perhaps primarily by the EDM research community that informs theory to practice transition.
2. Developing competency based EDM curricula to meet the complexities of 21st century preparedness and response.

Our goal is to embrace the new normal of ambiguity and complexity with adaptive and innovative design in EDM curricula. To begin this discussion we plan to have a special issue of *JEM* that will delve into EDM Pedagogy and a series of roundtable discussions with key stakeholders to identify key issues and gaps in our current approach to education and training.

If you would like to join our select committee to bring EDM learning into the 21st century via the special issue and the series of roundtables, please send a brief letter of interest to the JEM email box along with your CV to jem@pnpc.com with the subject line "EDM in the 21st Century." We look forward to talking with you.

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