

## THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING IN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

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### KEYWORDS

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### ABSTRACT

Rapid technology development, competition for resources, and an increasing awareness of the global community are but a few of the many forces and trends affecting today's Emergency Management Organizations. The key to success for Emergency Management Organizations involves making the right decisions on important issues such as how best to coordinate between agencies, determining the proper mix and application of technology, and identifying and obtaining the necessary posture to mitigate the effect of emergencies *before* they happen. The identification and implementation of alternatives providing the most effective solutions at the lowest cost will continue to directly influence the level of impact made by both current and future Emergency Management Organizations.

Implementing a continuous Strategic Planning process helps an Emergency Management Organization to formulate responses to issues such as those stated above. By continuously monitoring the forces and trends in its environment, the organization is able to succinctly identify its strategic issues and subsequently frame an appropriate infrastructure of goals, objectives, and strategies. The results on the operations of the organization are often substantial -- including clarification of mission and values, improved horizontal communications and coordination, better resource prioritization and allocation, and the reversal of organizational positioning from a "reactive" to a "proactive" stance.

Strategic Planning also holds significant potential for the emergency management community at large. The wide range of expertise and the inherent dependencies between Emergency Management Organizations at all levels of government -- including the local, national, and international arenas -- makes the emergency management community an ideal candidate to capitalize on the benefits resulting from joint strategic planning. The identification of common issues, priorities, and requirements provides the foundation for increased resource and information sharing, as well as the formulation of strategic partnerships between organizations to battle common threats.

### INTRODUCTION

Before, during, and after the onset of a disaster, Emergency Management Organizations (EMO) share a common mission -- to save lives, ease human suffering, and facilitate the restoration of social order and the community infrastructure. Effectively accomplishing this mission is an exercise in teamwork requiring the resources, capabilities, and skills of a myriad of organizations. Working together, these organizations provide not only the power of local and national governments, but also the specialized abilities of educational institutions and industry. In effect, these organizations collectively form an EMO community which rallies around a common mission.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the value of strategic planning in facilitating and enhancing teamwork within the EMO community. It is expected that through cooperative efforts the EMO community will realize increased effectiveness in accomplishment of its common mission. This premise is built upon the following suppositions:

- 1) EMOs share a common strategic mission.
- 2) EMOs must respond as a team to accomplish this mission.
- 3) EMOs must respond to many common issues.
- 4) Increased coordination and communication enhance team performance.
- 5) Proactive efforts contribute significantly to the mitigation of disaster effects.

By its very nature, strategic planning is forward looking. It is intended to improve organizational effectiveness by providing common direction based on mission understanding and environmental awareness. Strategic planning identifies a set of planning elements such as organizational goals, objectives, and strategies. Therefore, embracing the suppositions presented above, strategic planning is applicable not only to individual EMOs but also the EMO community at large. Figure 1 presents a

strategic planning process adapted for that EMO community.

### COMMON FACTORS

#### Mission

A strategic mission can be thought of as an organization's reason for existence -- that is to say, the "identifiable social or political needs that the organization seeks to fulfill" (Bryson 1988). Like its individual organizations, the EMO community shares a "common interest in the mitigation of human suffering and death caused by a disaster, a far stronger bond than any created by administrative means" (Sullivan 1994).

The common mission of the EMO community knows no boundaries -- because disasters know no boundaries.

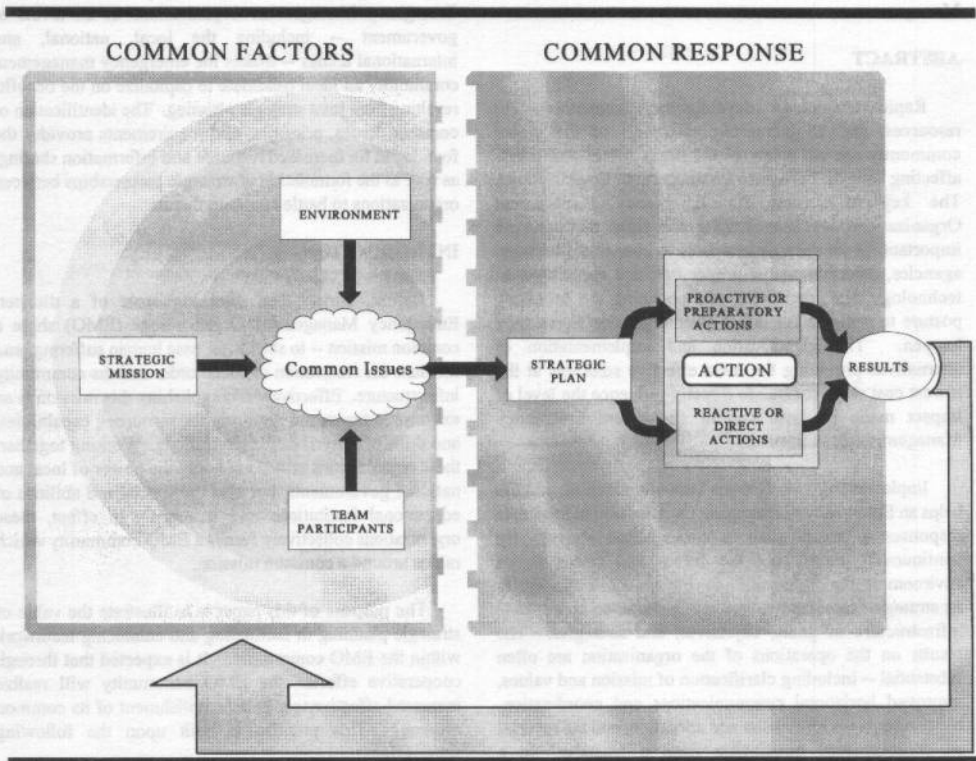


Figure 1 - Strategic Planning Process

Often disaster assistance comes from abroad during a time of need. When the Columbian volcano Nevado del Ruiz erupted on November 13, 1985 it caused a mud slide that virtually buried the city of Armero and claimed the lives of over 23,000 people. To provide disaster relief, workers from a dozen countries worked together in an international effort to support the stricken community -- including a mobile surgical team from Mexico, itself having just suffered the effects of a devastating earthquake in Mexico City only two months before (McDowell 1986). In the United States, disaster relief transcends state sovereignty. When a State Governor declares a state of emergency and calls for Federal assistance, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), assisted by numerous other public and private organizations, "mobilizes resources and conducts activities to augment state and local response efforts" (FEMA 1992) to save lives, protect public health, safety, and property.

### *Participants*

The teamwork required to accomplish the common mission involves a number of participating organizations. For example, the National Institute For Urban Search and Rescue lists 80 members on the Advisory Council for their Vision 2000 project -- an effort focusing on the need for comprehensive emergency mitigation and management (NI/USR 1994). From a strategic planning standpoint, participating EMO organizations can be viewed as mutual stakeholders. Stakeholders are "any person, group, or organization that can place a claim on an organization's attention, resources, or output, or is affected by that output" (Bryson 1988). Due to their inherent dependencies with one another to fulfill the mission, the participants that comprise the EMO community are stakeholders because they have a vested interest in one another's capabilities and performance.

Within the strategic planning process, the Stakeholder Analysis is used to help participating organizations understand what they need from one another. During the Stakeholder Analysis information is collected from each of the stakeholders, including:

- Unique or specialized capabilities and assets available to battle emergencies
- Specific requirements and needs necessary to enhance effectiveness
- Criteria for judging success and evaluation of performance against that criteria
- Respective stake in the collective community
- Influence on the community.

Because each organization operates under its own mandates, policy, and procedures, the Stakeholder Analysis helps the collective EMO community to clearly define roles and responsibilities for each of the participants and determine the optimum use of its collective resources. Identifying and reducing the functional gaps between organizations is the objective of this step in the strategic planning process.

### *Environment*

All organizations exist within a greater environment which generates factors that significantly impact the organization. All environments are in a continuous state of change. Understanding the state of change enables an organization to identify threats and opportunities in advance, and respond accordingly, rather than scrambling in response to sudden or unexpected events. Environmental factors take several forms including:

- **Scientific** - Many disasters are strongly related to scientific data. Consequently, having an understanding of the scientific implications of the natural environment is a critical factor in mitigating the effects of a number of disasters e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes.
- **Technological** - Working in tandem with our ability to understand scientific factors is our collective understanding and application of technological innovations. Remaining abreast of the march of technology enables us to understand how best to collect, analyze, and share timely information in our never ending mission against disaster.
- **Economic** - Economic forces and trends affect a host of factors for EMOs such as their ability to acquire and field resources. The level of economic infrastructure in an affected community and the alternatives available to mitigate disaster effects before, during, and after a disaster emphasize the need for strategic planning.
- **Political** - Political factors influence government decisions and actions at all levels -- alternately embracing and constraining EMO interests.
- **Sociological** - Sociological factors such as cultural norms and demographic composition vary between and within nations -- both geographically and over time. Understanding and responding to these sociological factors is progressively more important to participating EMOs in this increasingly close knit global community.

These environmental factors, referred to through the acronym **STEPS**, represent the continuous strategic planning exercise of monitoring environmental change. Because environmental changes will always impact the EMO community, continuous planning cycles are required to ensure the strategic planning process remains effective.

#### *Strategic Issues*

Developing an in-depth understanding of the common mission, continually taking the **STEPS** necessary to monitor the environment, and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the participants facilitates the identification of common strategic issues facing the EMO community. Examples of such issues include how best to communicate and coordinate between organizations; determining the proper mix and application of technology, and identifying and obtaining the necessary posture to mitigate the effect of emergencies *before* they happen. The identification and implementation of alternatives providing the most effective solutions at the lowest cost will present a continuous challenge and affect the impact made by EMOs. Additional issues may include how to achieve better resource prioritization and allocation and how best to formulate strategic partnerships between organizations to battle common threats. Developing a good understanding of the common issues facing the EMO community is the first step toward improving team performance, effectiveness, and mission accomplishment.

#### **COMMON RESPONSE**

The identification of common strategic issues sets the foundation for the formulation of a common and coordinated response. This response is manifested through three distinct components. First, the Strategic Plan articulates the collective planning elements such as Mission, Vision, Goals, Objectives, and Strategies. The second component is the Action which must result from the plan. The third component is the results which stem from the action and ultimately affect the common factors.

#### *Strategic Plan*

The Strategic Plan is the collective voice of the EMO community, stating its mission and values, future goals and objectives, and the strategies necessary to turn the goals into a reality. The Strategic Plan is developed in response to the common issues, and as such, it aims to improve coordination and communications, optimize resource prioritization and allocation, and support information sharing. These efforts can be thought of as targeting a

breakdown in the functional towers of the community i.e., increasing horizontal, or cross-organizational effectiveness. Correctly developed, the Strategic Plan reflects the consensus of all participants on the best way to collectively plan for, and respond to, the threat of disasters and emergencies. The Strategic Plan leverages the relative skills and capabilities of the members for optimum performance and becomes the springboard for action.

#### *Action*

The Strategic Plan must result in actions to provide benefit to the EMO community. Action manifests itself in two forms in the emergency management arena - proactive or "preparatory action" and reactive or "direct action".

Preparatory action includes those efforts undertaken to mitigate the effects of a disaster before the occurrence of the event. Preventive measures such as special construction requirements for buildings located near a fault exemplify preparatory action. Other examples include formal education, inter-organizational exercises, training of all forms, and contingency planning. Additionally, collection, analysis, and dissemination of relevant information concerning subjects such as high risk regions, estimated resource requirements, and state of readiness are indicative of the types of effort involved with preparatory action.

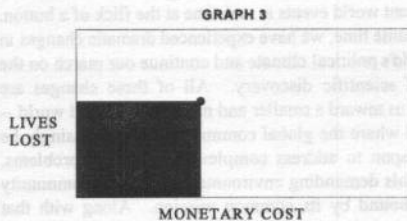
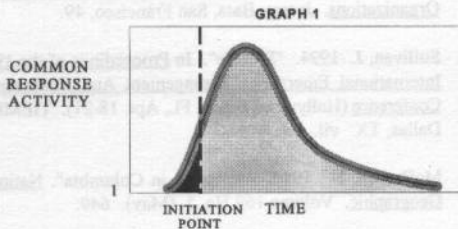
Reactive or "direct action" is the activity which occurs at the time an emergency occurs. Examples of direct action include the deployment and fielding of emergency management units, implementation of evacuation procedures, and the establishment of a Disaster Field Office. Additionally, direct action includes activities such as movement of emergency supplies and mass care of the affected population -- sheltering, feeding, and emergency first aid activities. Repairing damage to roads, airports, and communications systems are further instances of direct action activities.

#### *Results*

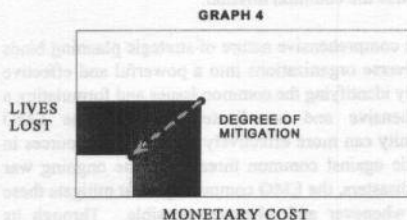
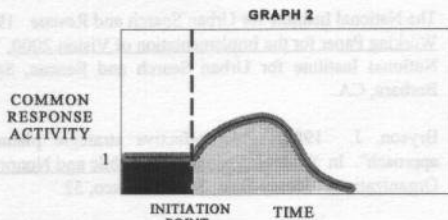
Actions must yield favorable results for the strategic planning process to benefit the community i.e., fulfill the mission of saving lives, easing human suffering, and restoring social order and community infrastructure.

To illustrate a potential benefit resulting from strategic planning, a conceptual example is presented in Figure 2. This example is based on the notion that Proactive or "Preparatory Action" plays a significant role in the mitigation of disaster effects.

**SCENARIO A**



**SCENARIO B**



**AREA UNDER THE CURVE 1**  
 ■ PREPARATORY ACTION - "STATE OF READINESS"  
 ▨ DIRECT ACTION

**Figure 2 - Potential Benefits**

In Scenario A, little or no investment is made in preparatory action, with the majority of the common response activity occurring through direct action. Because the EMO community is responding in a "reactive" mode, more response activity and resources are required over a longer period of time to restore the community infrastructure.

In Scenario B, an investment is made in preparatory action, resulting in an increased "state of readiness". The payoff for the investment in preparatory action is realized through a relatively decreased level of direct activity once the disaster occurs. Direct activity is reduced because less physical damage is incurred due to preventative measures and because the direct response is enhanced through improved coordination and resource allocation and enhanced capabilities e.g., technology and skills sets.

Additionally, direct activity is required for a shorter period -- improving the overall team performance of the EMO community.

In Graphs 3 and 4 disaster mitigation is measured in lives lost and monetary cost. Note that Graph 4 depicts a lower level of lives and dollars lost resulting from the investment in preparatory action. The reduction in these factors is indicative of the "degree of mitigation" achieved through preparatory action.

The appropriate types and levels of preparatory action necessary to battle each threat is determined through the strategic planning process undertaken by the EMO community. Additionally, it is suggested that the costs associated with sustaining the preparatory action are shared by the EMO community and other appropriate entities.

## CONCLUSION

The world we live in is continually changing -- and shrinking. Advances in technology enable us to view significant world events in real-time at the flick of a button. At the same time, we have experienced dramatic changes in the world's political climate and continue our march on the path of scientific discovery. All of these changes are leading us toward a smaller and more complicated world -- a world where the global community will increasingly be called upon to address complex and difficult problems. Given this demanding environment, the EMO community stands bound by its common mission. Along with that common mission come common challenges. To meet these challenges in the most effective way, the EMO community must respond as a coordinated team -- all participants working in unison and applying their distinct capabilities to accomplish the common mission.

The comprehensive nature of strategic planning binds these diverse organizations into a powerful and effective team. By identifying the common issues and formulating a comprehensive and coordinated response, the EMO community can more effectively leverage its resources in the battle against common threats. In the ongoing war against disasters, the EMO community must mitigate these threats whenever and wherever possible. Through its forward focus, comprehensive approach, and team building qualities, strategic planning provides the posture necessary to mitigate the effect of emergencies *before* they happen -- the true formula for mission fulfillment.

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