

The whys and wherefore of your 'average EOC'

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The term 'Emergency Operations Center' and its abbreviation (EOC) have been bantered about so frequently that there is a prevailing assumption by practitioners that the term is clearly and universally understood. Not so! In fact, the EOC concept generates a number of perspectives and expectations that are diverse and occasionally in conflict with each other. Through this article we provide the rationale, fundamental functions and key requirements of an effective EOC. Our discussion intentionally disregards community size or capacity to offer you ideas to ponder and suggest realistic enhancements to the existing systems of emergency management within your *context*.

Definition and description

A colleague (Art Botterell) has coined the following definition for an EOC: "Where uncomfortable officials meet in unfamiliar surroundings to play unaccustomed roles, making unpopular decisions based on inadequate information, and in much too little time." There is a great deal of truth to this definition, although its implied limitations could be readily overcome through commitment, planning, and practice (e.g., exercise).

The key element in any definition or description of an EOC is that it is a geographical *space* designated for the primary purpose of facilitating the *higher management* (i.e., strategic operations, away from site) of an emergency incident or a disaster event. That space could be just about anything (e.g., a building, tent complex, ship or air-board, or virtual) and may be placed anywhere, *as long as it is distinct from the operations at the emergency site*. The EOC is often a set of separate yet connected rooms or spaces, each with its own function. Collectively, they typically involve diverse *jurisdictions* or areas of responsibility, even if the EOC members represent a single agency.

It is important to note that any emergency may involve a variety of EOCs, each responsible to a separate entity (i.e., public, private, or Community-Based Organization). Inevitably, the EOC that is operated by the agency with the ultimate jurisdiction over the affected area will become the key or lead EOC. Nevertheless, other EOCs may be involved and carry equal importance for the agencies that they represent. And, each of these EOCs generally carries similar mandates with the key differences among them being more a matter of scope and jurisdiction.

Occasionally, the terms EOC, Command Center and Command Post are used interchangeably. The accuracy or inaccuracy of this practice depends on the *context* of the terms used. In other words, it depends on the *role* that the facility is expected to play.

EOC roles and capacity

When all is said and done, the primary role of an EOC is to provide strategic direction and support to the response organization at the emergency/incident site(s). Clearly, it is *not* to address tactical decisions or actions at site level!

Other EOC roles may include:

- Appointment of the emergency site ‘top dog’ (e.g., Incident or Site Commander, Emergency-Site Manager, or however he or she is titled)
- Facilitation of appropriate ‘declarations’ to the public
- Linkage to higher-order government agencies
- Coordination or reconfiguration of day-to-day (i.e., ‘normal’) services to the remainder of the affected entity (e.g., municipality, province/state, or Corporation)
- Coordination and dissemination of emergency public information (EPI)
- Initiation and (perhaps) coordination of the initial recovery process

Not all emergencies require an EOC; but all emergencies that overtax the response organization at the site require an EOC. In such circumstances, the activation of the EOC often has far reaching benefits within the affected area as well as beyond it. In that sense, the EOC typically extends in a significant way the capacity of any and all response agencies at the scene.

A number of factors shape the capacity of the EOC:

- Its typical distance (i.e., physical and emotional) from the site, often allows it to act in a relative less urgent or stressful manner than those at the scene
- Its participants typically include senior and key agency/organization players. They are assembled to bring their respective jurisdiction, network, subject-matter expertise and resources into a collaborative framework
- It often has a more sophisticated communication system and a greater reach to key players outside the affected area
- Its members have the jurisdiction (i.e., authority) to speak to other orders of government or the public on behalf of their municipality, agency or corporation
- Its members have the political and financial authority to commit extraordinary funds and resources

Consequently, the involvement of an EOC allows the site response organization to concentrate on its tasks within the outer perimeter of the disaster scene, leaving all else to be managed by the EOC. Any resources that are not readily available to the responders (i.e., their own or Mutual Aid resources) may be secured through the effort of the EOC personnel.

The EOC also provides a voice for the affected entity (e.g., municipality, county, region or Corporation) as a whole, both internally and externally. It could field public and Media inquiries and thereby defuse the pressure on site personnel. It could be the contact point for all external agency support or queries. And, it could provide continuity of effort into the recovery stage, even after the closure of formal response operations at the site.

Key considerations and requirements

EOCs exist in diverse physical structures, sizes and layouts. They operate through diverse member composition and resource allocation. An EOC’s effectiveness is not based on these factors *per se*, but rather on how they *best facilitate inter-agency communication, decision making and coordination!*

To that end, consideration should be given to a number of key requirements. The specific details of these are depended on the actual *context* of each operational entity (e.g., its needs or resource capacity).

Nevertheless, the space known as the “EOC” should facilitate different components that include:

- The EOC Main Room (often referred to as “the EOC”), where key information is managed or displayed, activities are monitored, and coordination occurs
- A conference room where consultation, planning and decision making could be conducted away from the hubbub of the main room
- A separate space for pre-designated “units” (i.e., planning, logistics, administration)
- Space for the public affairs or emergency public information personnel (should also include a media briefing facility that is best separated by access security from the EOC)
- Dedicated space for staff R&R (e.g., kitchen facility, washrooms, exercise equipment, quiet or sleep area, showers)
- Lots of storage space

Ultimately, the requirements of an effective EOC are driven by its functions.

Communications capability. This requires sufficient and appropriate resources for *uninterrupted communications* with the response organization at the site, other organizations within its jurisdictional boundary, the public and external key stakeholders or ‘players’. Required resources available to the EOC could include:

- Telephones with headsets to minimize background noise. (Hand-held radios with headset may be used as long as they do not lead to micro management at the scene.)
- Computers with network, internet and Email capacity
- Shared software for the exchange of information, perhaps through common forms
- Printer(s)
- TV access and VCR (i.e., to monitor the news and record related Media releases or display footage from the scene)
- Fax machine (e.g., to share maps, diagrams, reports)
- Notice boards (including electronic aisle, flip charts) upon which to display key information
- Access to a photocopier
- Tele or video conferencing capability
- Key documents in sufficient quantities (e.g., emergency plans, maps, directories, phone books, necessary forms)
- Event management software (as long as it is also used in non-disaster circumstances and EOC participants are familiar with it)
- Space for Amateur Radio operators and their equipment (with necessary power connection and supplies)

Decision making capability. To be effective, the EOC Main Room must be complimented with a quiet space (i.e., a meeting room) where briefings made be conducted and decisions reached, away from the many distractions of the Main Room. The two spaces need to be near each other to minimize travel or absence time of key personnel from the main room.

Coordination capacity. The EOC should have as many resources as possible (e.g., network, internet and Email connection) to facilitate linkages among the various key stakeholders within the EOC, as well as between it and its external stakeholders. The EOC should facilitate the conduct of briefings and face-to-face interactions for the sake of communication and coordination.

Administration. All of the EOC's other functions are dependent on the administrative support it secured for its operation. This includes *Support Staff* (e.g., to process the flow of information/documents, replenish needed supplies) and *Security personnel* (e.g., provide ID, sign in, access control, parking). As an aside, the EOC facility needs to be stocked with the necessary equipment, stationary and supplies (e.g., forms, pens, markers, flashlights, batteries, bulbs, food and water).

Operational continuity. The EOC should have the capacity to survive the same hazards that you expect to affect your jurisdiction. It also needs backup power supply (i.e., UPS, generator) and 'connectivity' (i.e., radio, phone, network, or satellite). Consideration should also be given to backup resources (i.e., change of shift) and the availability of *another and separate location* into which the EOC operation could be moved should the primary EOC become unusable.

Some EOCs are used on a day-to-day basis for other purposes (i.e., meetings, training, Council chamber). In such cases, the space needs to be converted quickly into a functioning EOC and its members become the *only* occupier of the space for as long as necessary. All other users must be aware that the space primary use is as an EOC, and that their use of it is privileged.

Lessons learned

EOCs have been used in a variety of jurisdictions, for diverse disasters or emergencies. No single model has emerged as superior to all others because each jurisdiction must assemble (and operate) its EOC in its own unique context. Having said that, a number of valuable lessons could provide guidance:

- The commitment to cooperate is *the* most important element of an effective EOC (i.e., team work is not an option)
- In the management of any disaster event, absolutely *nothing* can replace people (i.e., technology is great, but is only a tool for what should be a coordinated team of informed players)
- The ability to communicate accurately, effectively and on a timely basis to *all* concerned is the glue that holds all other functions together. No amount of effort to enhance this capacity is too much
- The activation of the EOC is not necessarily based on the size of the incident but rather on the amount of coordination and communications required
- Your EOC may be activated for an incident that occurs in another jurisdiction, but with an impact on your own.
- Activate the EOC sooner than later with more staff than initially appears necessary. It is easier and less damaging to scale down than scale up
- Whatever space you think is needed, you will need more
- Train more people than you think you would need (i.e., backup personnel is not an option!)
- Storage space is often forgotten in planning and desperately needed when EOC is operational
- Training, exercises and familiarity with EOC operations are critical for operational success
- Promote regular review of the current status of events and ensure that information is disseminated
- Define a position (e.g., *EOC Manager*) and task it with the *management* of the EOC process
- Task a position to monitor EOC personnel and coordinate follow-up (e.g., stress debriefing)
- Take care of all EOC personnel (i.e., provide creature comfort of light, warmth, food, rest, exercise)

- Appoint support or administrative staff to every EOC function, or risk the collapse of that function under the weight of its administration
- Prevent the back-up of the necessary 'paperwork trail' (e.g., keep your log well maintained, or timely reports). Have at least the following:
 - A Sign in sheet (to keep track of hours for payroll or insurance, and account for everyone)
 - Telephone/Log of Events (keep track of calls and requests to ensure proper followed up)
 - Fax cover/memo sheets
 - Equipment/Resource Tracking Sheet
- The EOC facility and its operations should be reviewed, debriefed and upgraded as necessary after *every* incident of its activation
- Personnel should be thanked and recognized as appropriate
- Consider leaving the EOC activated (even partially) through the Recovery period

Key trends

A number of key trends are currently apparent in the use of EOCs and include:

- Increased or more common usage. An increasing number of EOCs utilized for an increasing number of 'events' creates a sense of comfort and familiarity with the EOC as a tool of emergency response. Once established, few EOCs are decommissioned without being replaced or upgraded. This creates an ever increasing base for experience and knowledge, as well as a wider network.
- EOCs are of benefit for public and private entities alike. The same (EOC) concept or framework that assists municipalities and other government agencies could be used for hospitals, businesses, Industry associations and the like.
- The Virtual EOC is neither a dream nor a fad. In certain circumstance, due to the size and nature of a disaster event or a limited access to the EOC (e.g., snow storm), an organization may opt to use a virtual EOC, which would rely on an extensive array of communication tools. While it does not meet the benefits of face-to-face interaction (except perhaps in video conferencing), this approach has many benefits and is gaining much attention and practice.
- Mutual Aid is an increasing trend. The practice of Mutual Aid is of benefit not only for front-line response agencies. It is increasingly used at strategic levels where coordination and mutual support help overcome various limitations (e.g., resources, jurisdiction, time, and space). An interesting example is the development of a "Regional" or a Joint EOC.

Summary

To be effective, your EOC should fit the needs of *your* community, agency or jurisdiction. Despite the existence of many different EOC models, there is no single definitive approach to EOC construction, staffing, resource allocation or operation. If you do not yet have an EOC, research your neighbors' EOC (and other structures) looking for "best practices". Chances are that in your next emergency you will have to interact with your neighbors. Therefore, ensure that what you set up will easily function with their EOC facilities (i.e., organization, terminology, management). Then, hold emergency exercises to ensure that your expectations and plans are realistic. Train to your space, and get to know your EOC! Train with your neighbors, invite them to your EOC, hold joint exercises, and get to know them and their capacity.

An EOC needs to be functional for your needs, as well as those of companion organizations. It needs to remain a living entity, more important as an organization and a process than as a physical structure with set resources. Therefore, learn from your experiences, track your issues, implement changes and refine your operations *regularly*. Your EOC is your best support structure in a large emergency incident or disaster event. It is also a prominent component of your jurisdiction, signaling to its members that they are 'in good hands'. Take the time to ensure that your EOC will suit *your* needs within the context of *your* own emergency-related reality.

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