

Dialogue on Crisis:  
Effective response is also a great public relation opportunity

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The intent of this column is to generate discussion on emergency preparedness, crisis management and recovery topics. Readers are encouraged to send their feedback to the author whose address is at the end of this column.

Regardless of their organizational affiliation emergency responders (i.e., EMS, Fire, Police, EMO, and Social Services) are typically practitioners with a pragmatic hands-on mentality. An event like an emergency or a disaster is for them an opportunity to rush into the thick of the emergency situation and work to provide protection, comfort, stability, and the return to 'normal'. Most emergency responders rarely think of public relations, and most certainly do not see themselves as their agency most visible spokesperson. That is an erroneous mind set, which could reduce the long-term capacity of their response agency.

I should hasten to note at this point, that this article does *not* suggest that 'public relations' is or should be the most significant role of emergency responders. Nor does it imply that it should be the primary focus of their attention. To suggest this is foolish. However, the notion that public relations is the realm of others, or that direct response activities (e.g., the provision of medical care, protection, or direction) have no link to the way that the public views response agencies is equally foolish.

Why bother?

One may well anticipate an emergency responder from EMS, Fire or Police background to ask: "Why should I bother with public relations?" or, "What can I ever do that the professionals in public relations can not do better?" Good questions. However, they erroneously presume that the roles and functions of public relations are the same as those of 'media relations'. (The latter focuses on the interaction that one would have with Media representatives.) That is *not* the case, because the two functions are quite different from each other.

'Public relations' is the process that organizations undertake, through their representatives, to establish or maintain (often through their stakeholders) a perception of their organization. In the course of their public relations effort, organizations foster many significant factors: Recognition of their 'value' or presence, good will, cooperation, support, or commitment. These factors are critical to the operational wellbeing of any organization (private, public or voluntary), and could well have an impact on its survival.

Imagine for example performing your emergency-related functions during the response to a major emergency. Quite likely your functions would make you visible to the public at a very traumatic period for them as well as for you. What image would your actions portray to the public (perhaps through the media) about your skills, level of professionalism, ability to handle stress, possession of required resources, or attitude towards the Public that you are expected to serve? Would you appear to the members of

the Public as caring, reasonably demanding, supportive or communicative? What would be the Public perception of the organization that you serve?

Is the 'image' that you portray, even in the midst of emergency response, important to you, your agency and your profession? Absolutely! And, it is particularly *visible and consequential* because of the emergency.

Stated differently, the image or reputation of any response agency (including the tri-services of an EMS, Fire, and Police) could well define the kind of support (i.e., budgetary, resource allocation, or tasking) that would be provided (or not) by its stakeholders. For public agencies, that support is often reflected in the agency's budget, available resources, acceptance of its regulations or operational requirements and much more. Just quietly going on about one's business and doing one's job well, is simply not enough.

Those involved

The simple answer could be "Everyone", or all of the response agency personnel. But then, this needs clarification, because not all emergency response practitioners play this role, or play it equally.

Essentially, every emergency responder that is "out there doing his or her job" (i.e., in the public's eye) has the potential to boost or hamper the reputation of the agency. And naturally, those who are in direct contact with members of the Public are more likely to be in a position to influence their opinion.

Quite significant as 'public relations agents' are those who perform their emergency-related duties at emergency sites, reception centers, shelters, road blocks/barriers, morgues, and so on. These folks are at key and possibly 'flash' contact points with the Public, where their behavior as responders would be scrutinized by those who, most likely, would be highly emotional, opinionated and critical. The mix could be volatile.

Current approach to public relations

Organizations that undertake a concerted public relations effort typically do so through one or more staff members, whose role often includes one or more other functions. Their functional title may include media relations, public communication, or community relations. Title aside, these are the 'pros' that frame the process, develop related procedures, establish relationships (i.e., with key external stakeholders), develop communication or publicity tools, and coordinate the activities of the organization with regards to 'public relations'.

Public relations professionals are useful, but essentially limited *if not routinely supported* by the members of their organization. The best representatives of emergency response agencies are their first responders – the EMTs, fire fighters, or constables that are in direct contact with the Public.

The difficulty is that emergency responders, especially when they are directly involved in the emergency response effort, are extremely busy in the conduct of their duties. They are also likely to be preoccupied both emotionally and mentally. Moreover, as noted above, these folks are typically the 'hands-on type', and very much goal oriented. The

soft and fuzzy needs of 'public relations' are likely far from the mind of many of these responders, especially those who operate within the more Para-military or regimented organizations.

And so, the public relations function is performed either before or after the emergency event. The period *during* the event is typically excluded or ignored. That approach is regrettable because it misses an ideal opportunity when the eyes of the Public are glued to Media and the response effort. In short, you and the other emergency responders are in the spotlight and are not capitalizing on the opportunity ... to shine!

#### Capitalizing on the opportunity

A fundamental truth of public relations during emergency periods is that emergency responders need to act in a manner that recognizes and respects the concerns of members of the Public. This 'requirement' does not imply that emergency responders should ignore their SOPs or operational orders/directives. Nor are they expected to overlook their knowledge and experience regarding what must be done in response to the emergency at hand.

Effective public relations *during* emergency periods require that responders treat the Public in the most professional manner. This goes beyond the professional conduct of one's technical duties. It translates into a broad range of activities that include the following:

- *Keeping the affected members of the Public informed.* That goes beyond the more common approach of risk identification supplemented with suggestions of remedial or response actions. It requires responders to explain the reasons for some of their actions (i.e., evacuation, delay in returning evacuees), or the process that members of the public would be expected to follow. Through such explanations, and with some patience, much confrontation and bad publicity could be avoided.
- *Being available.* Members of the public who could access a response organization would be less likely to be frustrated and more understanding of the operational restrictions placed upon them. Similarly, the Public would be appreciative of any proactive effort (e.g., education, support, consolation) taken by a response agency on its behalf.
- *Treating those affected with compassion.* In the midst of the chaos, stress and urgency it is easy to miss that the situation has caused others (i.e., members of the Public) tremendous strain and severe losses. Simply put, they need to be treated with (and shown) much compassion. Even a small amount of understanding would go a long way to indicate to those affected by the emergency that their emergency responders 'care' and are not just going through the mechanisms of response.
- *Wherever possible tempering procedures, guidelines, plans or schedules to better meet the needs of those affected by the emergency.* The best example of this is the period following an evacuation when evacuees are allowed, at the earliest possible time, to return to their homes to retrieve their belonging, assess damage, begin repairs, or reoccupy their homes. Similarly, when such an

opportunity is not possible, those who act proactively attempt to explain the delay and expedite the return.

- *Acting in a coordinated fashion to ensure efficiency as well as expediency (especially during the recovery process).*

Emergency response organizations should not shy away from 'soft bragging', or the promotion of their achievements *along the response period*. To illustrate the point, what if each response agency kept its members aware of the 'successes' that have occurred during its response to the emergency? And, what if these personnel communicated these successes to members of the Public, or representatives of other organizations? Aside from the obvious morale building and internal communication effort, this process could in a very informal way ripple the information to other agencies and the Public. (The Media may also pick up some of these stories.)

In this manner, the message that you communicate throughout the response effort is that your organization is on the ball, is active (perhaps proactive), and has already achieved some successes towards returning life to normal. The point is that 'success stories' help enhance public perception of the emergency response effort. Therefore, these stories should not come out all in one bunch, often at the end of the emergency response effort. Rather, they should be small bits of news communicated often and on a timely fashion throughout the response (or recovery) phase.

It is such effort that would get you and your agency in the Public's eye, mind and heart. By concentrating your attention on your operational goals your response agency may well miss a golden opportunity to enhance its public image *during* the emergency response period. This effort need not be extensive, but does require consistent effort at organizational as well as individual level (i.e., the EMT, fire fighter or Constable on the ground).

Without a doubt, the primary job of emergency responders is to protect life, limb, property and the environment then return life to normal as soon as possible. A significant part of this role relates to *people*, members of the Public. They need to see, feel and believe that emergency responders also 'care'. That is the secret of integrating emergency response and public relations.

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