

Dialogue on Crisis:
The need for “education” too

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The intent of this column is to generate discussion on disaster 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.

Practitioners in any profession are typically quick to see the value of training in the practice of their profession. Some also see value in education. But more often than not, their appreciation of ‘education’ wanes as time passes and their experience increases. The prevailing attitude is often one of “been there, done that, let’s move on”. In fact, employers and practitioners who are swamped with operational demands inadvertently foster much of this attitude. Regrettably, this is an unhealthy situation for the individual, the employer, the profession and its clients!

We who are in the emergency management field should not become smug; we are not an exception to the rule. In fact, given the youthfulness of our profession we need to be particularly careful in nurturing our own growth and that of our profession.

Training and education

The terms training and education have often been bantered about as if they are one and the same. They are not. But they do typically overlap, hence some of the potential confusion.

“Training” is traditionally the term used for the transfer of skill from a trainer (i.e., instructor or facilitator) to a learner. In the process, the trainer imparts certain knowledge that would facilitate or encourage the “trainee” to perform an activity in a desired or recommended way.

Companies, Departments or agencies typically provide training to its members from all levels of their organization. However, those at the lower levels of the organization are likely to encounter more training opportunities than those at the higher levels. The focus of that training is likely to be on the transfer of knowledge and skill development.

By comparison, the term “Education” is more appropriate to the transfer of knowledge, the development of understanding (i.e., a broader perspective than just having the facts), and the enforcement or change to the learner’s attitude about the subject matter. Education is not restricted to formal institutions of higher learning, such as universities or colleges. The same instructors or facilitators that deliver training may deliver educational programs. However, their teaching style and objectives must be different.

Education is often reserved for those who are entering a profession as a way of ensuring a standard of performance or enhancing the learner’s success in securing a job. Alternatively, education is used in the latter stage of a career to broaden one’s capacity as a professional and perhaps also for personal growth.

Education is, and should be recognized as being more than classroom focused. It is the growth in awareness and the capacity to look at profession-related problems from a more global perspective than just the “do this and then do that” approach of traditional training. Education includes the exposure one gains through reading professional publications (i.e., magazines, books, newsletters), attendance at conferences, or participation in emergency-related professional associations.

Both training and education provide individuals an opportunity for growth, and enhance their capacity to perform their professional duties. The key point here is that both are required on an on-going basis to stimulate GROWTH! Given the rapid evolution of emergency management as a field of practice, lengthy periods without these skill-enhancing stimuli (i.e., training or education) could result in professional atrophy.

What is available across Canada?

Training opportunities abound in Canada. However, Canadian emergency practitioners do not appear to have ready or reasonable access to them.

Emergency-related training in Canada is provided by many organizations including the public and private sector, as well as Non-government Organizations (NGOs). Training through the public sector may be found at federal, provincial/territorial, and in some cases even at municipal level. Typically, this training is limited to employees or agents of the respective government, and the training is limited to the direct needs or scope of that government. In other words, there is little time or perhaps interest to consider the needs or involvement of other key players.

Industry-delivered emergency training is also typically delivered to its own employees or response partners. However, by necessity Industry takes a slightly broader view of the response effort than the public sector, to also consider the actions of the regulators (i.e., government). Nevertheless, there is still a general need to broaden their view of the response effort.

The training delivered by a number of Canadian NGOs is nearly always focused on the NGOs mandate. It is more broadly available to the ‘Public’ but lacks the recognition of the profession as a viable source for training its members.

The availability of emergency-management education across Canada is a major problem. At this point, no Canadian university or college delivers what may amount to an emergency management degree or certificate program. (Stay tuned; Brandon University is about to develop such a program.)

To be fair, a number of universities and colleges do offer segments of emergency-related programs. However, these are typically focused only on a segment of the field (i.e., hazardous materials, communication, or journalism), or place the emergency-related courses in another field of study (i.e., geology, community development, sociology). As a result, Canadian emergency practitioners currently lack a certification of sorts to show current or future employers as an indication of competence.

Educational materials are also a major problem. Canadian practitioners often rely on information and publications generated in the US. Of the five or six emergency-related professional magazines that exist in Canada, none provide an overview of the field. Most

address their respective field of practice (e.g., fire, EMS, police, SAR). Their unique perspective is valuable. However, a much-needed perspective of the field as a whole and the inter-agency reality of disaster response are sadly lacking.

We in Canada are becoming well served with emergency-related conferences. Professional conferences occur throughout the year and are available across Canada. Their topics are typically diverse and they provide the necessary multi-professional or agency perspective.

What is needed?

Those of us with a function or an interest in the various functions of emergency management need many tools to maintain our capacity both sharp and current. Failure to do so keeps us fighting future wars with yesterday's strategy and weapons.

There are two key aspects to the availability of these tools: Supply and demand. On the supply side we need a wide range of training programs that are easily available and allow for cross-jurisdictional or professional pollination. No longer can we afford to remain isolated in our respective jurisdiction, skill-set or profession. No longer can we ignore the dynamic growth of our all-inclusive field of practice!

We also need Canadian-related and recognized programs that would prepare, develop and certify practitioners in the emergency management field. They need to be broad programs that develop in their participants a sense of the whole and an understanding of the dynamic relationship among its components. They need to provide employers with a confidence that the graduates of these programs could perform their role based on a high standard of understanding

Canada needs well-supported professional publications that discuss and promote the broad issues unifying the specific response professions such as fire, police, EMS, SAR, or EMO. (One such magazine, which enjoyed a high readership support, was recently discontinued after two years due to a lack of financial support.)

And then, we need to seriously make the current Canadian Emergency Planners Association (CEPA) work. It has been on the books for the last two years but has yet to gain a foothold. It, or another such association, must succeed! Without it we would not be able to advance our practice in a concerted and meaningful way. It would be restricted to piecemeal gains and uncoordinated practices.

On the 'demand' side of the equation, we need to change our view of emergency-related training and educational opportunities. In short, we must ask for them, pursue them, and ensure that we support them by attending courses or programs, subscribing to magazines, attending conferences, and devoting time to related associations. It is this type of 'demand' that would ensure that the 'supply' stream is maintained.

The main points ...

There is an old maxim that says: "You have to take time to sharpen the saw". It is applicable to any practitioner in any profession. It is a particularly worthwhile advice for us in the field of emergency management because our field is relative new and is evolving rapidly.

We the practitioners need to stay of top of the learning curve to stay current and effective. That means that learning has to be part of doing. It also means that we need to access and make the best possible use of available training programs, educational opportunities, professional publications, conferences, associations, and much more.

The public and private sector in Canada also have a role to play. Its various EMO or response organizations need to encourage the growth of professionalism among its emergency management practitioners.

The bottom line for all of us is that we need to accept that however experienced, trained or educated we are in this field, we must remain active learners. We must learn and improve or practice, or regress against advancing knowledge. But then, this is the secret of life.

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