

Module 9: Communication Constraints

MPDM-620-101: Risk Perception Awareness

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Communication is quite simply one of the most important aspects of being effective as a member of an emergency management organization. Internally, command staff must set the tone for response priorities and allow branch leaders to relay these priorities effectively. Externally, the public perception of a situation or an organization drives public policy, including legislation, freedoms and restrictions, and cultural norms. To operationalize any situation effectively, there must be some level of pre-planning. To plan effectively, the allowances and constraints should be observed, codified, and internalized such that any final policies or game plans have a sufficient baseline plan to deviate from based on the situation, with the desired outcome in mind. Communication constraints then are an integral part of effective operational planning and execution.

My organization is a strict top-down kind of affair, with volumes of regulations and procedures for just about every situation. We use table-top, functional, and full-scale exercises to train our responders to be ready for the unlikely event of a reactor accident. In these exercises, we inevitably reach a point where we must contact headquarters in Washington, D.C. for approval of communication content for release to the media. I have recently identified that the large metropolitan area in which we operate has government and civil authorities that desire significant information in the first hours of an event. My organization's lack of flexibility and current procedures hinder this free release of information. Some of the reasons for this are important. There are technical aspects that deserve proper vetting prior to release. The public's instinct to self-evacuate from an area with a radiological release should be dampened; evacuations when not warranted can cause significantly more harm than good depending on the situation. The constraints that my organization imposes also have ethical undertones. The

public generally mistrusts every part of the nuclear power industry, with the exception of the Navy. Should the Navy have a significant problem, our national security could be impacted. The vetting of technical data before release and the timing of releasing information to civil authorities and the media can paint a picture that the Navy is more interested in preserving it's reputation than protecting the public, which is far from the true reality in which myself and other emergency managers work tirelessly to craft.

To overcome these organizational barriers, I work on finding small chinks in the armor. I have done some rapid improvement events where we map out our processes and look for inefficiencies, outside of technical data review. I have had my staff put together some holding statements that are immediately releasable to the media and civil authorities that can help satiate the initial hunger for information until we can get more available. There is still a lot of work to be done, especially in communications technology. As we recently saw in the case of the USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT (CVN 71) problem with COVID-19 in Guam, Navy leadership is not aligned on the best practices to communicate effectively in the modern information age. With the loss of a carrier captain and the Secretary of the Navy, I now see that pushing harder on my team to iron out our internal response to unexpected events that are outside of our normal training regimen is vital to our success. We need to give leadership the ammunition they deserve to effectively communicate planned solutions to the public. Embracing softer skills in public affairs, increasing use of social media and technologies, and running table-top exercises outside of our usual activities will be necessary to overcome the organizational constraints the Navy finds itself in today.

References

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