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Christine G. Springer

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, christine.springer@unlv.edu

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Emergency Managers as Change Agents

Christine G. Springer, Ph.D.

SINCE 2001, THE FEDERAL EMERGENCY Management Agency (FEMA), the International Association of Emergency Management (IAEM), the Department of Defense (DOD), and Homeland Security Defense Educational Consortium have been defining and refining competencies for emergency management professionals. In so doing, they have addressed directly and indirectly the qualities of leaders. We know that leadership is not a person or a position. Rather, it is a quality that emerges from a complex relationship among people and is based on trust, obligation, commitment, emotion, and a shared vision of the good. We also know that transformational or change-based leadership has become an organizational necessity in emergency management given that the profession is just now coming into its own and that jobs within it are not traditional in terms of what is being done, where, how, and by whom. A process involving a flexible team with diverse skills, interests, and attitudes, operating within a networked world, has replaced the fixed bundle of tasks previously performed by any individual emergency management worker.

Some authors suggest that transformational leadership best describes what emergency managers do in that it deals with an expansion of the domain of effective freedom, the horizon of conscience, and managers' intentions to share mutually rewarding visions of success so as to empower employees to convert those visions into reality.¹ Some could suggest that emergency managers' leadership might best be explained as *situational*, assuming that leadership behavior is contingent upon the variations in the situation.² Others suggest that it is *functional*, evident in an individual's leadership qualities and communication skills during an emergency.³ For example, during the events of September 11, 2001, office workers carried injured colleagues down the stairs of the World Trade Center, while firefighters rushed up to help victims. Those in build-

ings near ground zero pulled pedestrians off the street and out of harm's way. Staff in coffee shops organized to provide food to relief workers. Employees at many firms in Manhattan refused to be cut off from their jobs, finding new ways to get to work by kayaking the East River, renting buses, and hiking.

Unprecedented events such as the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, as well as an increase in natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, have created an urgent need for innovative ways to protect the American people and have spawned a new breed of government managers to lead that effort. Managers are now challenged to anticipate and be prepared to effectively respond to hazards of all type—man-made and natural—that have similar consequences on their communities. Just as the so-called Greatest Generation⁴ brought forth the best and the brightest to serve the government at a time of need, a new breed of leaders is being sought within the Intelligence Community, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and DOD. To this end, DHS has created a DHS University System that includes a leadership institute. When Secretary Michael Chertoff introduced the initiative on September 28, 2007, he indicated that the goal of the institute is to “support a community of learning to ensure DHS employees are prepared to apply knowledge and skills to meet both individual and organizational goals.”⁵

Today, we see this new breed of emergency managers emerging, and they can best be defined as *change agents*.⁶ They are in formal leadership positions as well as in functional specialties, and they are doing things in radically new ways toward a common vision. These leaders are certainly not traditional public managers; rather, they know how to enact innovative ideas by working within existing bureaucratic hierarchies and by injecting a sense of passion and purpose that brings along those who are more risk averse. At the same time, many emergency managers do not see themselves as leaders, and those that do define a leader's characteristics differently depending upon their backgrounds, job responsibilities, and employers (i.e., whether they work for the federal, state, or local government).

Research since 9/11 has identified change agents at the federal level of government, but little research has been done to identify them at the state and local levels. Thus, this research was undertaken with three goals in mind: (1) to identify and clarify distinct change agent character traits that exist within the emergency management field; (2) to determine how emergency managers at the state and local levels of government differ in their view of the profession from those at the federal level, especially when they identified themselves as change agents, and (3) to reconcile key competencies and principles in emergency management with emergency managers' perceptions of leadership.

BACKGROUND

In 2005, Dr. B. Wayne Blanchard identified ten key competencies as being critical to effective emergency managers and thus a primary focus of the emergency management curriculum:⁷

1. An understanding of the comprehensive emergency management framework and philosophy
2. Leadership and team building
3. Management
4. Networking and coordination
5. Ability to integrate planning with other organizations and functions, such as public works, public health, human services, and transportation
6. Mastery of key emergency management functions, such as risk assessment, planning, training, exercising, emergency center operations, and the establishment of interoperable communications
7. Ability to operate within the various constraining and enabling influences that exist within the political, bureaucratic, and social dimensions of a jurisdiction or organization
8. Ability to effectively use technical systems and standards such as the National Incident Management System, global positioning systems (GPS), and geographical information systems (GIS)
9. Ability to identify socially vulnerable populations in communities and reduce their vulnerability in a disaster
10. Experience in the field of successful disaster operations through internships, service learning, exercise participation, membership in Community Emergency Response Training (CERT) teams, and real-world on-the-job time spent.

In addition, the IAEM has established eight principles for the profession:⁸

1. *Comprehensive.* Emergency managers consider and take into account all hazards, all phases, all stakeholders and all impacts relevant to disasters.
2. *Progressive.* Emergency managers anticipate future disasters and take preventive and preparatory measures to build disaster-resistant and disaster-resilient communities.
3. *Risk-driven.* Emergency managers use sound risk management principles (hazard identification, risk analysis, and impact analysis) in assigning priorities and resources.
4. *Integrated.* Emergency managers ensure unity of effort among all levels of government and all elements of a community.

5. *Collaborative.* Emergency managers create and sustain broad and sincere relationships among individuals and organizations to encourage trust, advocate a team atmosphere, build consensus, and facilitate communication.
6. *Coordinated.* Emergency managers synchronize the activities of all relevant stakeholders to achieve a common purpose.
7. *Flexible.* Emergency managers use creative and innovative approaches in solving disaster challenges. [This is especially the case after disasters when predefined approaches may be inadequate to the situation at hand.]
8. *Professional.* Emergency managers value a science and knowledge-based approach based on education, training, experience, ethical practice, public stewardship and continuous improvement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research sought to identify and clarify distinct “change agent” character traits that exist within the emergency management field. To do this, we surveyed 300 individuals attending the 2007 IAEM Conference, including leaders from DHS, DOD, and state and local emergency management departments as well as police, fire, and sheriff departments. Respondents (identified by age, sex, and level of government in Table 13-1) were asked seven questions, and fifty respondents were subsequently interviewed so that they could clarify and elaborate upon their answers.

Table 13-1.
Characteristics of
Survey Respondents

Age	%
20-35	10
35-50	45
50-60	35
60+	10
Sex	
Female	15
Male	85
Level of Government	
Federal	33
State	17
County	15
City	35

The nature of this inquiry and the lack of previous studies in this area required a combination of descriptive analysis and qualitative interviewing. Thus, we began the survey by asking the following four questions:

1. What management practices do emergency managers use and how do they differ due to unit of government and mission of the agency?
2. How do emergency managers measure their success? Do they measure their success by how well they deploy functionality and capability, by how well they maintain or increase funding and resources, by how well they revamp business processes with deeper interagency connectivity, or by how well they secure policy changes?

3. Or do they measure success in a different way—by how many complaints are generated throughout the bureaucracy that they are attempting to change or by how well a new language is adopted within the agency.
4. What kinds of communication, delegation, or status characterize the relationships between the change agent and other public organizations that are key stakeholders in success?

We then conducted follow-up interviews to clarify responses so as to better understand the profile of change agents in emergency management, describe how change agents behave within their organizations, and delineate how they differ and/or resemble those at the federal level as discussed in Daniel Forrester's and other work regarding leadership in emergency management.⁹

The follow-up interviews asked the following questions:

1. Does the term *change agent* or *leader* best define successful emergency managers that you know? [A suggested definition of *change agent* was provided: someone who accomplishes the changes necessary to get the job done. A suggested definition of *leader* was also provided: someone who is known for his or her honesty, vision, competency and who has the ability to inspire.]¹⁰
2. Describe someone who has been successful in enacting significant change to bring about more effective emergency management in DHS, the police or sheriff's department, the Department of Emergency Management? Why have they been successful?
3. Which of the core competencies do you view as most important to leaders in the field?
4. Which of the IAEM principles do you view as most important to leaders in the field?

RESPONSES

In compiling our responses, we broke them out into the following topics: characteristics of emergency managers as change agents, core management strategies identified as being critical to success, characteristics of leadership, measurements of success, and relationships between emergency managers and key stakeholders.

Characteristics of Emergency Managers as Change Agents

In 2005, Sapiient Corporation coined the following definition of change agent:

A forward-thinking and acting person who is able to deliberately and tangibly impact the mission and organizational direction of a bureaucracy from its status quo into an integrated, future state capable of contemplating and ultimately thwarting security threats, including natural hazards that might befall the United States of America.¹¹

This definition was developed after interviews with senior officials throughout DOD and the Intelligence Community. We sought to determine whether that definition fits state and local managers as well as managers at the federal level.

One leader from DHS offered this description: "Change agents see what is and what ought to be. They see a problem and are willing to take risks to fix it."¹² While most respondents in our inquiry do not view emergency managers as change agents (73 percent), they do view them as leaders (95 percent). Those that see emergency managers as change agents tend to be younger (between 35 and 50 years of age) and to have been with their current organizations for two years or less. However, those working outside emergency management departments tended to recognize individuals that they know in the field as change agents to a greater degree than those working inside emergency management departments (1.7 on a 7-point scale in which 1 = high and 7 = low).¹³

Throughout our inquiry, the attributes of leaders and change agents that were mentioned most often are that they

1. Challenge the status quo
2. Frame a clear, compelling vision
3. Focus on new outcomes versus process
4. Realign and lead within the bureaucracy
5. Uncover the right talent and build upon it through teams
6. Listen intently and be open to learning by being aware and knowledgeable
7. Inspire confidence

Management Strategies

Having core administrative competencies was ranked first as the management strategy most critical to success, and the critical competencies identified for managers fell into three major categories: communication, supervision, and compliance with regulatory and fiduciary obligations. Communication during a crisis was defined as asking the right questions before communicating, having and following a crisis com-

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munications plan, and staying ahead of the headlines by communicating effectively using fact sheets on the scope of the incident and responses that have been drafted to answer the three big questions: *What did we know? When did we know it? And what did we do about it?* Effective supervision was defined as understanding the collaborative nature of emergency management's mission and strategic imperatives as defined by the staff and administration, setting expectations, and holding subordinates accountable for compliance to those expectations through regular interaction. Compliance with regulatory obligations was defined as continuously updating knowledge available from numerous sources about all the various mandatory legal issues and becoming an expert in those areas; compliance with fiduciary obligations was defined as having—or ensuring that one of the manager's direct reports has—experience in the field; being well versed in such functions as quality assurance, planning and budgeting, regulatory compliance, and financial and contract maintenance; and having a thorough knowledge about the key responsibilities and contractual commitments of participating agencies.

Ensuring effective teamwork with adequately trained teams was ranked as the second most critical management strategy. Respondents noted that field tests of teams and exercises resulted in remarkable reductions in avoidable errors and a greater cohesion of team members. They further noted that although teamwork has traditionally been valued primarily for the benefit it brings to the team as it helps to reduce costly turnover in personnel, that perception fails to appreciate the profound benefits that an effective, efficient, empowered team environment bring to overall incident response and recovery.

The abilities inherent in these strategies are similar to but much more specific than the expanded competencies identified by IAEM in 2006:¹⁴

1. Understand basic management theory, principles and tools
2. Be familiar with organizational management theory and behavior normally and in crises
3. Understand the public policy environment
4. Demonstrate a knowledge of the administrative roles of an emergency manager.

While federal respondents tended to identify more with top-down processes (53 percent), local respondents talked more about an evolving and shared leadership, which tends to be more consistent with contemporary leadership theory (60 percent). They described the collaborative development by participating agencies of a cohesive team, mission, vision, and strategic initiatives, which were consistent with the impera-

tives of their own agencies but crucial for “building trust and a foundation for a well understood and deeply inculcated culture devoted to excellence.”

Profile of Leadership

Respondents were asked about someone who is successful in enacting change in emergency management at the state and local governmental levels. From their responses emerged the following profile of leadership:

Leaders are aware and knowledgeable as well as alert to the environment. Attentive and discerning, they notice things to a greater degree than other people. This astuteness is not limited to one type of crisis: these leaders function in mine disasters, shooting incidents, terrorist events, floods, and hurricanes as well as in hospital emergency rooms. They are naturally curious all the time and excel at learning from crisis incidents. They retain information that is instrumental to improving the next response and recovery, remember specific details, and repeatedly refer to the fact that they knew through information or deduction what needed to be done.

Successful leaders are also open to sharing the way in which they took charge. In situations where the designated authority was present to lead subjects out of harm's way, leadership was a natural evolution of planning in action. Yet even where there was no designated authority present, the same dynamic occurred and a leader emerged to address the situation. Thus, leadership develops in a natural way in response to what is needed.

Leaders are decisive yet flexible; they are able to make decisions, but if circumstances change, they can adapt. They are also open to input from others on site. In most crises there is a “second in command,” an individual who offers worthwhile suggestions and support and serves as a sounding board when the leader is deciding what approach to take. This individual, who serves in a consulting capacity to the designated authority, may ultimately emerge as a leader.

Successful leaders have a calming effect on their colleagues and fellow team members as well as on community members. They seem to be aware of others' levels of fear and can offer reassurance when it is needed, thereby engendering a feeling of confidence in their ability to direct everyone to safety.

Finally, leaders act logically. Their decisions are appropriate to the situation and congruent with available information.

These characteristics underscore those noted by IAEM in 2006: Leaders (1) have vision, (2) think strategically, (3) walk the talk, (4) get others to value and promote disaster reduction, and (5) act as change agents in their organization and their community.¹⁵

Measurements of Success

Most commonly cited as a measure of success was the effective deployment of systems on time and on budget and in what is deemed to be a fully functional way in "after-action reports" (1.7 on the aforementioned 7-point scale). The second most commonly cited is that of maintaining or increasing agency funding and resources for emergency management (2.2). The third is effectively securing policy changes needed to inform policy in a meaningful way so that planning, response, and recovery is fully functional (2.5).

Emergency managers, it was noted, arrive at their positions for many different reasons. Some are appointed, some are elected, and unfortunately, some win the position by default because no one else is interested, available, or capable of doing the job. A majority of respondents indicated that emergency managers frequently wear "a number of hats" (66 percent) and "are not well paid or funded" (72 percent). Thus, they noted, sometimes a measure of success is the length of time that an individual stays in the job as an emergency manager. And sometimes the best indication of success is the generation of complaints throughout the bureaucracy about the changes occurring in emergency management: without those changes being noted, nothing happens in a substantive way (3.8).

Relationships Between Emergency Managers and Key Stakeholders

To ensure effective performance at all levels of emergency response, the emergency manager must learn how to acquire power, maintain influence with many different stakeholders, and understand how to facilitate priorities for the agency in the political world. Power acquisition, as respondents noted, begins by establishing personal and professional credibility and by leveraging opportunities and maintaining one's skills technically and administratively so that a perception of competency is established.

Respondents noted that it is no easy feat to acquire power and achieve leadership in the complex and political environment of emergency management. Opportunities for doing so can come through active participation in committee work, delivery of training, attendance at workshops, and the facilitation of exercises so that other managers and key stakeholders gain confidence and trust in an emergency manager's level of knowledge and ability to make decisions.

Local emergency managers suggest that "pushing up" the needs of emergency management to be accepted as part of an organization's priorities amounts to leading in ways that the leadership literature identifies as being successful.¹⁶ First, for example, leadership must develop incrementally based upon trust, experience, and credibility. Second, no one follows a leader's vision unless he or she is first willing to fol-

low the leader as a person. Third, pragmatic leaders manifest practical "street smarts" by developing an accurate and predictive intuition of what motivates action. They achieve this by carefully listening, by observing human behavior, by understanding their own strengths and weaknesses, and by effectively communicating with people using matters of the heart first and then logic. When communicating, language is as important as are the words used so that those listening instinctively know who the leader is, that the leader cares, and that the leader will not radically change direction without notice and good reason.

Fourth, good leaders are not deemed to be selfish: they actively recruit followers and team members who share and complement their beliefs, empower and develop successors who carry on the vision, and selflessly distribute ample credit for successes. Fifth, good leaders recognize that they do not stand alone, and that while they may occasionally need to fight to maintain sovereignty, their dependence on the goodwill of so many other supporting entities is critical to their success. Emergency managers must be collaborative at all times. To quote one respondent: "They collaborate, coordinate and communicate." Leaders also understand and accept conflict. When conflict occurs, as it inevitably does during the advancement of goals in a competitive environment, finding the moral or ethical high ground is frequently the best first step, but so too is engaging in prudent negotiation that preserves important relationships with key decision makers.

Sixth, overcoming resistance to change was also noted as an important quality for leaders to have. Pushback must be anticipated as a challenging consequence of any attempt to move toward change, and given the complex and political environment within which emergency managers operate, it is important to celebrate and give credit for victory at every incremental milestone, learn from setbacks, and leverage any movement toward the desired direction.

Finally, emergency managers need to acknowledge the community and the board of elected officials that they serve. Good leaders understand referent power; they understand how fragile perceptions are and how those perceptions must be protected by the consistent application of honest and ethical behavior while at the same time the leaders are protecting themselves through carefully worded contractual arrangements.

At the federal level, these leaders have been called "Over-Authorized Senior Directors" because they understand that they must not only be authorized by a congressional or an executive order, but also be empowered by the leadership above them.¹⁷ Their character traits include having forceful personalities, refined listening skills, and facility with interagency communications. Their modes of operation include being able to interact with those to whom they report and convince them that an action

is necessary, as well as empowering those who work for or with them to take that necessary action. In addition, they seek out subject matter experts to be on their team so that they can implement effective change.

CORE COMPETENCIES AND LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

As stated above, another goal of this research was to reconcile the key competencies and established principles of the profession, as enumerated earlier in this chapter, with the characteristics of successful emergency managers identified by our respondents. To do this, we asked the respondents to rate various qualities, competencies, and principles on a 7-point Likert scale, in which 1 = high and 7 = low. Results of this analysis are shown in Table 13-2.

Table 13-2. The Characteristics of Successful Emergency Managers

Characteristics of Successful Emergency Managers (n = 300)		What Core Competency Makes The Most Difference (n = 300)		What IAEM Principle Makes the Most Difference (n = 300)	
Characteristic	Score*	Competency	Score*	Principle	Score*
Challenge the status quo	5.6	Comprehensive understanding	2.0	Comprehensive understanding of emergency management	1.5
Frame a vision	5.2	Leadership and team building capability	1.3	Progressive prevention and preparation skills	1.7
Create outcomes vs. process	1.7	Integration Skills	2.0	Integration Skills	1.9
Realign and lead within bureaucracy	1.5	Management Ability	1.7	Collaboration Skills	2.0
Build the right talent and team	1.3	Coordination Skills	2.5	Coordination Skills	2.5
Aware and Knowledgeable	1.2	Technical acumen in the emergency management field	4.2	Flexibility during crisis situations	3.5
Inspire confidence	1.2	Mastery of key emergency management functions	1.5	Professional approach to management	4.2
		Years of experience in the field	1.5	Risk-driven management skills	2.5
		Understanding of how to deal with socially vulnerable populations	3.5		
		Sociopolitical communication skills	1.5		

* Scores are based on a 7-point Likert Scale where 1 = high and 7 = low.

Regarding the characteristics of successful emergency managers, being aware and knowledgeable and inspiring confidence (1.2 for each) are the traits most often cited, followed closely by an ability to find the right talent and build a team (1.3). Realigning and leading within the bureaucracy is also an important quality (1.7), but challenging the status quo and framing a vision was not rated highly (5.6), particularly by state and local emergency managers (breakdown of respondents by level of government is not shown on table).

With regard to core competencies and principles, mastery of key emergency management functions and a comprehensive understanding of emergency management were continually referred to in follow-up interviews as defining leaders in emergency management (1.8). These qualities remind us of the degree to which credibility has been reported over time as the foundation of leadership:

[A]bove all else, people want leaders who are credible. We want to believe in our leaders. We want to have faith and confidence in them as people. We want to believe that their word can be trusted, they have the knowledge and skill to lead, and that they are personally excited and enthusiastic about the directions in which we are headed. Credibility is the foundation of leadership.¹⁸

Our results are also supported by the leadership literature because responses were often linked to the degree to which a leader is able to successfully exert influence over others.¹⁹ While respondents did not use the word *influence*, they tended to mention the most significant elements or dimensions of credibility, such as competence, trustworthiness, and even dynamism to a lesser degree.

State and local emergency managers did not identify professionalism as a leadership quality as often as federal managers (35 percent/54 percent). This is consistent with findings reported by Carol Cwiak in 2007, in which she quotes one emergency manager as saying:

The idea of guiding principles suggests a degree of professional consistency that I do not believe exists. By this I mean that I believe we have not yet achieved an emergency management "profession" where the range of practices . . . is acknowledged as different applications of the same principles.²⁰

State and local respondents value leadership and team building more highly than federal managers (65 percent/38 percent) but value technical acumen less (75 per-

cent/25 percent). These differences in perception may be due to the newness of the field and differences in job duties and experience.

AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The differences in attitudes reported here between state and local respondents on one hand and federal respondents on the other should be explored in future research. Future research should also explore how perspectives differ on core competencies and principles, depending on whether the individual is in an emergency management department or a security department. Those from security departments tend, as an example, to be more likely to rate technical acumen as a core competency than did individuals who work in emergency management departments (60 percent/28 percent).

Several other questions may require further inquiry—for example, are characteristics identified through our research truly required for an individual to fulfill the role of leader during a crisis situation? To what degree are the competencies and leadership principles more a function of the level of government and the type of agency than they are of experience in the field or job description? And are there in fact change agents prevalent at the state and local governmental level who truly are flexible and adaptable and competent but are defined differently or simply thought of as leaders?

Finally, since the ability to communicate in a crisis is rated highly as a key competency, should it not also be identified as one by IAEM and the Emergency Management Institute? While the 2006 IAEM Expanded Outline of Competencies identifies listening and communicating as important interpersonal skills, 90 percent of our follow-up interviews refined what they felt was a key competency by identifying the ability to effectively communicate both within and outside of the organization as a key competency. Several respondents suggested that leaders literally have a crisis communications plan in place to answer the three important questions cited above: *What do we know? When did we know it? What are we going to do about it?* They noted that many companies such as Procter & Gamble, British Petroleum, and Kraft Foods now are able to bring a communication plan into operation within the first eight hours after an incident arises. These plans include (1) an outline of who will speak for the organization, (2) designation of a place where the team will meet and of the person who will own the telephony aspect of the response and activate the crisis alert system, (3) core crisis messages that can be customized to respond to the media, (4) practiced responses to the twenty worst questions that could be asked, (5) a frame for any event so it can be identified as an incident or a crisis and the requisite facts provided, and (6) a way of asking the media and the community to help, as well as an open portal for continued communication and a way of updating the organizations actions through media networks.

Endnotes

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