

Availability Is *Not* a Skill Set

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Over the course of time, I have been involved in numerous major incidents and/or disasters, from the terrorist attacks of 9/11 through the recent BP oil spill. Those of us who live in the world of response know that one thing will always be present when we show up – chaos. When things do wind down, in many cases, politics will rear its ugly head. The art of managing through all of that, while still remaining effective as a responder, is what it takes to make a difference. It is also why it takes a *professional emergency manager* to do it properly.

NIMS and ICS Have Proven to Work Time and Again

The Incident Command System (ICS) has evolved over the course of more than 30 years. As a command structure, it has proven itself, time and again, to be a solid approach to managing crises, large and small. In 2004, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, in response to Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 (HSPD-5), directed the adoption of the National Incident Management System (NIMS).

The combination of NIMS and ICS have given emergency managers a comprehensive set of guidelines and frameworks within which they can operate. Further, mandating the adoption of NIMS and ICS at the local, state, tribal and federal level has ensured that, in the face of a large, complicated incident, we all have a common methodology from which to operate.

Common Methodology Seen at All Levels Due to NIMS and ICS

HSPD-5 states that: “Beginning in Fiscal Year 2005, federal departments and agencies shall make adoption of the NIMS a requirement, to the extent permitted by

law, for providing federal preparedness assistance through grants, contracts, or other activities. The Secretary shall develop standards and guidelines for determining whether a state or local entity has adopted the NIMS.”

One of the things to always remember about disasters is, they’re always local first. The true first responder is usually a regular citizen who happens to be right there, right then. Most of the time, in my experience, people will try to assist others to the best of their abilities. Thank goodness for that. Then the professionals show up, and the untrained responders step back and let them get on with their work. Even then, if that regular citizen turns out to be a highly-qualified subject matter expert, they still may be incorporated into the response – not to run the overall mission, but to do and/or advise on the elements for which they are the most qualified.

Breakdown of ICS Command Principles Was Major Challenge

In the recent Gulf Oil Spill response, we’ve seen a significantly different approach to incident management. Sure, there have been offices established, calling themselves “Unified Command,” but the reality is very different. What we saw in our branch and what we’ve heard from others across the multistate response area was that British Petroleum retirees, brought back into service, were placed into Incident Command leadership roles. In many cases, these individuals were direct replacements of qualified NIMS/ICS-trained operators. The results were not always pretty. In most of our after action reports, the primary challenges described were directly related to a breakdown of the ICS command principles.

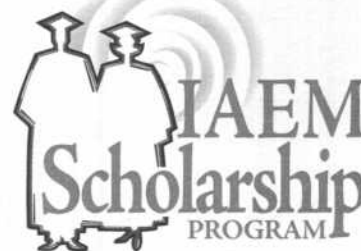
So, what’s the answer? I’d suggest that we begin with a more

aggressive adoption of NIMS/ICS in the private sector. Organizations such as Home Depot, WalMart, Accenture, Fidelity and others have done so, with great results. Should it not be mandatory for *every* private sector organization that operates elements of critical infrastructure? Certainly, this would be in line with the National Response Framework and the National Infrastructure Protection Plan. The result of such an effort could be an improved, more effective response to the next “Big Event.”

Conclusion

As a professional and self-confessed NIMS/ICS bigot, I can’t express enough how frustrating it’s been to watch excellent subject matter experts attempting to lead a major incident response. As a businessman, I recognize that a solid manager can learn to lead almost any initiative.

However, learning to fix the engine on a 747, while in flight, is not a good idea. No matter how many great managers you have on the bench, it’s always best to put the best people for the job, in the job. Remember – availability is *not* a skill set!



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