Confidence as the Foundation for Effective Emergency Response

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Flight departments regularly reach out to Fireside Partners for help with facilitating an emergency response exercise. "I want you to really hit us hard on this one," they often say. "We’re looking for a tough drill. Something that will wake people up and show us what our gaps are."

We are not in the business of saying no to our customers, so we comply - and the outcomes predictably fall into one of two categories. The first is a department that walks away from the drill with a few necessary changes identified for their procedures or plan, but has a roadmap to accomplish them, and is overall more capable and better prepared to respond. The second, well... the words "disjointed" and "shaken" and possibly even "embarrassed" come to mind.

Why such a dichotomy?

The principle of "Occam’s Razor" applies here. Occam’s Razor holds that one should not increase, beyond what is necessary, the number of entities required to explain anything. This is often interpreted as, "The simplest solution to a problem is usually the right one." With that in mind, the answer here is simple: the first outcome results when an organization is confident, and the second results when they are not.

An organization will never be prepared for every possible emergency scenario. No incident or accident will have the perfect response compiled in a checklist, and an Emergency Response Plan won't ever be detailed or comprehensive enough to address all of the infinite possibilities that exist. Rather than trying to train for every contingency, the best approach is to concentrate your efforts as an organization on building confidence.

The Power of Confidence

Confidence brings clarity in situations where stress and confusion run rampant, where the
goalposts can be hard to see through the fog, and where the questions become harder to answer, not easier, as time goes on. Confidence leads to more favorable outcomes, more often.

When clients call our emergency line at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning letting us know they've had an accident, we don't immediately rush to grab a notepad and start taking down details. First, we pause and take a breath, and then we ask a simple question: "How can we help?"

The caller is typically prepared to share the when, where, how, and why, and to ask for our advice. However, they often have not yet identified what their organization needs. Thinking about their needs in that moment forces them to slow down and focus their thoughts - and that focus and the process of methodically analyzing the situation in front of them has a calming effect. With calm comes confidence. Once a base level of confidence is established, we can begin to respond effectively.

Three Steps to Self-Assurance

How do you go about building confidence? I would suggest that you start by focusing your efforts as an organization on three key areas: education, culture, and capabilities.

- Educate your team on the principles of effective emergency response, and help them develop mindsets, habits, and procedures that will enable you to put those principles into action as a department. Learn from situations where other organizations have run aground and identify ways to avoid the same pitfalls.
- Develop a culture where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities, where process improvement and change are the norm, where teamwork is fostered, and where accomplishments are celebrated.
- Conduct a careful assessment of your equipment, technology, and resources, and ensure that you have what is needed to be able to take care of your people and protect your organization in a difficult time. Lastly, take stock of your team. Ensure you have the right people in the right places at the right times doing the right things.

Once you have worked through these areas and are confident that a baseline of capability is present, the next step is to begin testing.

Testing Tips

Start small and test technologies, checklists, and procedures individually before conducting a
more comprehensive exercise. Test thoroughly and test often. Most of the process of adjusting procedures and refining plans and checklists should take place during this phase. Only when your team has been able to test, adjust, and retest enough that they have built confidence in their ability to respond is it advisable to conduct a drill.

Drills should be done to practice the right way of doing things and to allow for a penalty-free atmosphere where areas for improvement can be identified. Drills should not be done to shake the foundations of your emergency response program and see if they come crashing down. Drilling before your team is ready will only erode confidence and increase confusion, and it can take years to recover from the results.

Focus on implementing a measured roadmap that builds confidence and resiliency in your emergency response team. Provide opportunities for testing where mistakes can be made and processes improved in a non-threatening environment. With this as your foundation, a drill will be a final capstone exercise that shows your team, "We can do this!", rather than a source of frustration and stress.

Confidence is competence in the realm of emergency response. A confident team that trusts in its abilities is ready to tackle the confusion and uncertainty of an incident or accident. Finding a clear path forward may seem impossible when things fall apart, but an organization with confidence has the best chance at putting the pieces back together.

Fireside Partners Inc
Fireside Partners, Inc., is a fully integrated emergency services provider designed to provide all services and resources required to respond effectively and compassionately in a crisis situation. Dedicated to building world-class emergency response programs (ERP), Fireside instills confidence, resiliency and readiness for high-net worth and high-visibility individuals and businesses. Fireside provides a broad array of services focused on prevention and on-site support to help customers protect their most important assets: their people and their good name.
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