THE FUTURE OF EMERGENCY RESPONSE & PREPAREDNESS: Insights from EDP's 2017 Speakers

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1. What do you think is the biggest challenge in keeping schools and universities safe today?

One of the biggest challenges in keeping schools and universities safe is the ever changing landscape of social media. Social media outlets make it easy for people to send out information about events. Unfortunately, a lot of the information that goes out is not accurate. Public safety has to try and ensure that they can use social media to their advantage.

2. Where do organizations tend to go wrong when it comes to threat assessment?

I think a better question is how can organizations improve their threat assessment capabilities. In an ever changing world, threat assessment teams must involve a myriad of professionalism in order to be successful. Team members have to communicate with one another and solicit the community to immediately report incidents or inappropriate behavior to responsible staff members.

What factors should be included in an emergency preparedness long term strategy?

A major factor that should be included in an emergency preparedness long term strategy is a test of the plans. The best strategies must be tested and revised every so often to ensure that the organization’s plans are adequate.

What do you believe the future of emergency/disaster planning and response looks like?

The future of emergency/disaster planning and response is headed towards having emergency practitioners who are better trained. With emergency incident emergency managers and practitioners learn from the event and the mistakes of the past and take actions to avoid them.
1. What do you think is the biggest challenge in keeping schools and universities safe today?

Communication. A plan of any kind is only effective if you are able to communicate it to all of the stakeholders who may be impacted during the execution of the plan. This is especially critical with an emergency plan whether it's an earthquake or an active shooter scenario. With the diversity of schools and the development of offsite micro-campuses, it is becoming increasingly difficult to communicate effectively to the masses. To be efficient, there needs to be a centralized method of relaying detailed safety plans to everyone to ensure they are prepared during an emergency. There also needs to be accountability within the educational institute of the delivery of the communication of the plan. If people understand what to do during an emergency then there will be less chance of mistakes.

2. Where do organizations tend to go wrong when it comes to threat assessment?

Complacency. Threat assessments tend to be a slippery slope. The biggest mistake an organization can make is to make a bad assumption that “it will not take place at our institution”. If the threat appears to be credible, than treat it as such until determined otherwise. It is always better to be on the side of caution then to be ill prepared for a situation which could have had precautions put in place prior to them happening. Although impossible to predict either mother nature or human behavior, there are always warning signs which should be considered before a catastrophic event takes place. You just need to be cognizant of them and not dismiss them based on complacency. It is better to plan for the worst and hope for the best. No one will ever criticize you for ensuring that your workplace is too safe.

3. What factors should be included in an emergency preparedness long term strategy?

Redundancy. If you have one, it will break. If there is only one person responsible for something that is important, they will be unavailable. These issues are called single points of failure so should be some of the first things that you look at as part of the long term strategy for emergency planning. Once identified and contingencies addressed for these important items, then a robust testing and training strategy needs to be developed. This will help to ensure that the redundant people and facilities both function. Neither can be done in isolation. They need to be incorporated into a comprehensive long term strategy that will not only ensure for redundancy, but also will allow for continual testing to ensure they all work.

4. What do you believe the future of emergency/ disaster planning and response looks like?

Collaborative. As identified in Question #1, the biggest challenge in emergency and disaster planning is communication. Many of the mistakes which are made in responses to events today, is that there is no coordination of efforts amongst responders/groups/ agencies. Multiple agencies will simultaneously stand up Emergency Operations Centres (EOCs) with no coordinated plan on how each of the agencies will communicate with one another and have an effective response to the emergency. The future of emergency and disaster planning needs to involve a more collaborative method to avoid duplication of efforts and ensure a more seamless response for all involved. I’ve seen glimpses of this collaboration and look forward to more cooperation in the future.
1. What do you think is the biggest challenge in keeping schools and universities safe today?

There are so many risk variables today, that we need to shift some energy away from prevention and invest more in preparedness. You can only do so much to protect your population in an open, public access environment. The challenge is preparing your population on what to look for and how to react should something happen. The problem is that meaningful preparedness training cannot be done in 15 minutes. Competing for the time and space to do meaningful preparedness training on campus is our biggest challenge.

2. Where do organizations tend to go wrong when it comes to threat assessment?

In certain, serious cases, I believe it is important to have external specialist available who can provide an unbiased and professional opinion of a situation and/or individual. A completely internal threat assessment team may, in some instances, be too close or have the appearance of being too close to a situation. Having the “external” expert will add credibility to your team and it may also reduce your liability exposure.

3. What factors should be included in an emergency preparedness long term strategy?

Repetition; I believe that most people do not place emergency preparedness in their top 10 of important things to do. This is generally due to our relatively “safe” environment. People who live with a constant threat of disasters like earthquakes or tornadoes, generally get it. In our case, we need to get the message across through repetition, making the idea of emergency preparedness common place. The trick is finding balance between Chicken Little and the deniers, not to mention anyone in particular.

4. What do you believe the future of emergency/disaster planning and response looks like?

I think there will be a significant shift in effort towards public preparedness. There is only so much that prevention and/or mitigation that can be done, especially with the new and evolving threats. Response will remain generally unchanged except for new technology to assist responders. The effort placed in preparing our communities will take on a greater importance because a well prepared community is more educated to the threats. They will generally reach out faster, if they see something and will respond better, reducing the number of casualties.
1. What do you think is the biggest challenge in keeping schools and universities safe today?

Schools and universities are places of mass gathering for a very diverse group of people. This alone presents a significant challenge in ensuring that everyone in their care is safe from a very wide range of hazards. Many of these people (i.e. children) are considered to be more vulnerable than the general population. This requires that a school or university be aware of the different types of hazards that could impact them and develop appropriate plans that address the potential impacts of the hazards. The needs of the groups being planned for must be considered in planning. This can be a fairly large, ongoing task which requires proper staffing and resources, both of which might be in limited supply.

2. Where do organizations tend to go wrong when it comes to threat assessment?

The foundation of threat assessment is knowledge of the hazards and their risks. We live in a world with access to information at our fingertips; however, an important thing to keep in mind is that not all of it is accurate. Myths and misconceptions about the hazards, risks, and protective actions are still rampant. That is why I recommend using an approach based on science to ensure that the information that you are basing your assessment on is accurate. Another important aspect to be aware of when it comes to threat assessment is risk perception. Studies have found that people are not very accurate in assessing their level of risk due to a variety of factors.

3. What factors should be included in an emergency preparedness long term strategy?

Emergency preparedness must be viewed and supported as an ongoing process. There are many factors that change over time such as the hazards, risks, and even a change to the layout of your school buildings might require a change in your protective action procedures. Too often I see schools and other organizations go through the process of developing an emergency plan and procedures, only to leave them to collect dust on a shelf. A successful long term strategy also includes training and exercises/drills since the best plan will not help if no one is aware of it.

4. What do you believe the future of emergency/ disaster planning and response looks like?

I think we will see more advancements in emergency management. This will be pushed in part since natural disasters are increasing in frequency so there will be a need to adapt. The field of emergency/disaster management is still fairly young and even in the past 10 years or so we have seen huge improvements. Technology, for example, has the potential to provide even better situational awareness and to assist with other aspects of response. One of the greatest challenges will be a cultural shift to further embed emergency planning and response practices to ensure that all schools and universities receive the support they need to have effective emergency management programs.
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