In early March of 2007, a small group of local, state, and federal emergency managers and academicians met at the Emergency Management Institute in Emmitsburg, MD. The roundtable was in response to a call by Mike Selves, president of the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM). The group included people drawn from IAEM, National Emergency Management Association (NEMA), the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 1600 committee, the Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP), the private sector, the academic community, and other groups. Dr Cortez Lawrence, director of the National Emergency Training Center, lent his support and Dr Wayne Blanchard facilitated and moderated the discussions. The charge was to help emergency managers define their role and function more clearly and to develop a list of principles to define the profession and the practice of emergency management. A number of “principles” have been identified in the practitioner and academic literatures, but no comprehensive list seems to exist.

It became clear from the beginning that there was remarkable consistency in the participants’ views of emergency management. The differences tended to be over conceptualizations or terminology. No one disagreed with the need to use comprehensive emergency management as the foundation, for example. Assumptions about basic values and principles are evident in the Certified Emergency Manager program and in the evolving NFPA 1600 and EMAP standards. However, recent events have demonstrated the lack of understanding of emergency management among policymakers at all levels, and discussions within the profession have demonstrated a need for greater clarity for those who are trying to fulfill their responsibilities to their communities and organizations. Some of the problems that emergency managers have experienced with Homeland Security policies and programs also reflect basic differences over roles and functions and orientations toward public participation in decision making, transparency in decision processes, and the sharing of information with other agencies and the public. National priorities often conflict with local and regional needs, as well.

The principles of emergency management identified by the roundtable were as follows:

Comprehensive—comprehensive emergency management involves all-hazards, all phases or functions, and all sectors. The broad view of the role fits the scope of “programs” as defined by NFPA 1600 and the EMAP standards and the assumptions that underlie the Certified Emergency Manager program.

Risk-driven—emergency management, to be effective, has to focus on real, measured risk. The first priority of emergency managers is to protect their own communities. Therefore, planning, resource allocations, and policy priorities have to address the hazards that pose the greatest risk to communities.

Integrated—emergency management involves bringing together all levels of government, the private sector, and nongovernmental organizations, as well as volunteers, and making them part of the effort to deal with hazards and disasters. Links to nongovernmental organizations and the private sector and receptiveness to volunteers are essential.
Coordinated—emergency management focuses on organizing all stakeholders behind a common purpose. The coordinative role is evident in emergency operation center functions. It also reflects the notion that emergency managers coordinate, rather than direct, emergency operations.

Collaborative—emergency management is based upon genuine collaboration, rather than command-and-control. Genuine collaboration is a process of relationship building. Mutual trust and open communication are critical elements of those relationships.

Flexibility—emergency management requires adaptability, innovation, and improvisation. Inflexible plans and organizational structures reduce flexibility and, therefore, should be avoided.

Progressive—emergency management requires learning to anticipate and prepare for future disasters. Disaster-resistant and disaster-resilient communities are goals.

Professional—emergency management is a science- and knowledge-based profession. Ethics, education, training, experience, public stewardship, and continuous improvement are essential to the practice of emergency management.

The eight principles are being circulated for discussion and are being fleshed out by members of the roundtable to ensure that they can be clearly understood and operationalized.

Emergency management is distinct from emergency response. It is a management field that requires expertise in planning, organizing, directing (managing), staffing, coordinating, reviewing (evaluating), and budgeting, as well as some knowledge of the science of natural and man-made hazards, including terrorism, and skill in problem-solving. It involves facilitating the work of the many networks that are responsible for emergency response in the United States to ensure that response operations make the best use of available resources and are effective. Emergency managers should be part of the management team in municipalities, counties, states, private businesses, nonprofit organizations, and other organizations. As Tom Drabek concluded in his classic 1987 study, The Professional Emergency Manager, interpersonal skills may be more important than technical skills.

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