INTRODUCTION

The general perception on the part of “civilians”—the public whom we serve—is that emergency management (EM) agencies are composed of people who overexaggerate, “catastrophize,” and who are basically purveyors of gloom and doom. We are seen and thought of as undertakers (no offense meant to undertakers!)—a necessary evil. We prepare for the unthinkable in the face of the mindset that “it won’t happen here.” Ironically, we are somewhat like undertakers in that we take on tasks no one wishes to think about, let alone act on.

Those who are responsible for EM—public officials, corporate bureaucrats, and the like—have some understanding of our function and have incorporated us in their organizations mostly because it has been mandated. We were forced upon them for their own protection. We do not have any everyday value—until a crisis hits. Then our value is real, although only for a short time until things go back to “normal.”

Why is it that, when it comes to emergency-management response and planning (EMRP), people exhibit such resistance? This column will explore some reasons for psychological resistance and discuss a strategy to help develop acceptance.

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESISTANCE

When fundamental change becomes necessary within an organization or community, people react—often with fear. Something “different” implies new threats, new government organizations, new practices, changes in basic values, and changes in social norms. “New” means moving from the familiar to the unknown, creating anxiety for individuals and tension within organizations and communities.

An example would be New York City before 9/11. How many individuals were actually worried about their safety from a terrorist attack? How many entertained the possibility that such a disaster could occur? After 9/11, many communities and organizations reacted strongly to the events, both in New York and elsewhere. Many people became concerned that an attack could happen where they lived. All of a sudden, the barriers to EMRP were taken down. It took a crisis to sensitize the public to its vulnerability. If 9/11 had not occurred, would we still be experiencing apathy to emergency preparedness measures—that “it couldn’t happen here” mentality?

The period between when something ends and something new starts is called a transition. Transitions often occur over long periods of time, and the change is expected, like moving from being a child to being an adult. The intervening teenage years provide the transition.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 allowed no transition from life without terror to life lived in a paranoid fear of the unknown. Dramatic, terrifying, and sudden change is called a crisis. In many areas of life, change happens as a result of a crisis. Accepting the new is forced on people because they have no other choice,
not because they have proactively planned for the unexpected.

When transitions occur, our perceptions of our safety and place in the world fundamentally change. People find security in the familiar and are invested in day-to-day activities they have “made their own.” Recognizing the end of an existing order creates myriad feelings of loss. The impact of change happens within the following areas:

- **Security**: Not knowing what the future holds due to an actual or perceived threat undermines our sense of security. We lose our sense of relationship to the community and to organizations (e.g., knowledge of our roles, responsibilities, and conduct). This results in a loss of feeling “in control.” For example, the absence of the Twin Towers can still provoke anxiety in New York City residents and visitors, because they were a landmark, provided a sense of identity, and were once a sign of security. One of EMRP’s main goals is to re-establish a sense of security.

- **Competence**: Loss of a sense of competence is another factor in resistance to change. Not knowing what to do or how to perform what is expected produces a sense of disorientation and creates anxiety. In addition, it generates feelings of embarrassment when you feel your are not performing to personal expectations or to the expectations of others. People achieve a level of comfort from having their life routines “all worked out.” Crisis results in new routines and an accompanying sense of inadequacy related to self-image and work identity. During 9/11, volunteers came to help in droves not only to benefit the community but also to foster a sense of competence in themselves during the crisis.

- **Relationships**: Loss of contact with familiar people—peers, customers, neighbors, family, etc.—creates grief and anxiety specifically related to our sense of belonging. Often, there are accompanying feelings of hurt, disappointment, perceived breach of promise, and guilt. Loss of relationships often leads to anger at establishments, withdrawal, and mistrust of others. Fear of further loss interferes with establishing new relationships and connections, and the foundations of current relationships are challenged. (How many people experienced distrust of Middle Easterners after 9/11?) Conversely, another interesting phenomena occurs during a crisis: barriers are reduced and connections are made between people based on an intense shared experience. People sometimes establish long-term relationships based on this crisis-event, while others never want to see the people again due to the painful memories they evoke.

- **Sense of direction**: When change occurs, people experience a loss of understanding as to where they are going personally and professionally and how this new “imposed” direction fits into their lives. Not understanding new roles, goals, and purpose creates both nostalgia for the old path and confusion about the new one. A sense of mission is lost that also served as a motivator—giving purpose to our lives. Emergency procedures often involve counterintuitive measures that are confusing to people. For example, in case of fire, a common exit may be blocked. Common sense dictates that people go to another exit. The reality is, the resulting fear and confusion creates such disorientation that people cannot figure out what to do. Their “personal patterns” have been disrupted, affecting their normal sense of direction.

- **Territory**: Change of physical space also creates a sense of loss. People perform
tasks and assignments in a specific place that provides comfort and a sense of productivity. Loss of physical territory extends to loss of ability to fulfill responsibilities. Familiar space creates a sense of psychological and physiological safety and security. When this space is lost, people feel threatened and react with fear, anger, and anxiety. An example of this phenomena occurred when remote disaster-recovery backup sites were first being considered for computer systems. The staff involved did not want their computers outside of the “normal” space. Fear of a loss of control and of information theft were often cited as the reasons. These fears produced many barriers for the initial setup of backup systems.

**Status:** Implementing EMRP measures creates different pressures within organizations. These can be observed in broad social groups and on the personal social level as well. When a potential crisis is conjured up, visions of harm to the person, family, community, and workplace emerge. Interdependencies within the community or company and their interplay are perceived as threatened. Questions emerge regarding the status of individuals within the community or organization: Who is in charge? Who makes key decisions? Who will help us in the event of crisis? How do I ask for and accept help without losing face?

**CONCLUSION**

Addressing resistance to EMRP measures based on the six areas above should be a key goal of future EM planning and policy. EM professionals, organizations, and politicians need to allay these bottom-line concerns before EMRP can be fully and successfully instituted. Social groups today are in a state of transition, moving from a patriarchal concept (“The government, company, or community will take care of me”) to a personal one (“How will I make it? Who will make the decisions, and what will the consequences be?”).

One hopeful note: When a real or potential threat is acknowledged or a crisis occurs, people develop a new sense of competence because they have to deal effectively with the transition. EMPR can empower people both before and during a crisis, which EM planning personnel need to stress. If there is no acknowledgment of a perceived threat, people will continue to resist change and view EMPR with apathy and anxiety.

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