

The Ten CERTmandments

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When I took over as the civilian training manager for our local Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) in Culver City, CA, I tried to find a way to convey the “feel” of emergency response to both new students and past graduates. What resulted was what I call “The Ten CERTmandments” (my apologies to both believers and nonbelievers). They do not contain any real technical details regarding the CERT skills to be learned; rather, they are philosophical ways of approaching all of the different aspects of emergency response. They help students remember how they can be as safe and effective as possible when performing their rescue duties in any emergency situation. But the CERTmandments are more than just means to an end; they should be considered as inviolable as the original Commandments, and they must be strictly adhered to during any kind of emergency.

1. **Thou shalt always keep thine own self safe.** This may be one of the few times when “looking out for Number 1” is socially acceptable. In fact, this rule must be followed in every single CERT activity we engage in. You, as an emergency responder, are your CERT’s most important resource following a disaster—not your fire extinguisher, not your radio, not your medical supplies . . . *YOU*. And if you don’t do everything in your power to keep yourself safe and functioning (for example, choosing not to run into burning buildings or pick up and carry victims covered in hazardous materials), you run the risk of becoming a victim yourself, going from an asset to a liability. When that happens, you are not only lost to the emergency

response effort; now already scant resources have to be diverted to take care of you!

2. **Thou shalt do the most good for the most people.** It’s a sad and tragic—but inescapable—fact that in a major disaster, we just won’t be able to save everybody. All we can do is try to help as many people as possible—and that may mean having to leave someone who is too far gone (euphemistically referred to as “unsalvageable”) or whom it would require too much time and too many people to save. That’s one reason why CPR isn’t part of the CERT curriculum—while taking the time to resuscitate one person, we could lose the chance to save many others. This may be the toughest of all the CERTmandments to accept and follow.

3. **Thou shalt walk, not run.** Of course, after disaster strikes there will be people who need help and need it *fast!* But while we need to assist people in a timely fashion, it is neither safe (see the first CERTmandment) nor efficient to rush right into any situation without giving it a proper “size-up.” Before entering a building to perform search and rescue, we first walk around the building and get a sense of its status (Is it on fire? Do the utilities need to be shut off? Are there any hazards? Is the building going to fall down any minute?). Before treating patients, we first do a “head-to-toe” assessment (Am I

treating a broken arm when my patient is actually going into shock?). Figuring out beforehand what needs to be done and how it should be done will not only save time in the long run but will also save lives—possibly your own.

4. Thou shalt never go it alone. This is very simple: always have a buddy with you! Whether fighting a small fire, searching a building, or acting as incident commander, no CERT member should ever attempt any operation without having another teammate backing him or her up. You'll need that extra pair of eyes to watch out for hazards, that extra pair of hands to help you extract a victim, that extra mind to help figure out the best course of action, and, of course, that extra pair of feet to go for help if you get stuck somewhere! And perhaps more importantly, you'll get the enormous psychological boost that comes from just having another person with you, keeping you from feeling alone in what could be a tremendously stressful situation.

5. Thou shalt know thine own limitations. Despite the valuable CERT training we've all received, we are still neither professional rescuers nor superheroes. Situations will arise during an emergency that we're just not capable of handling, and we will have to recognize and accept our limitations so that we can be true to the first CERTmandment. This goes for any and all limitations, whether they are due to equipment (your extinguisher is too small to put out a particular fire), training (a victim needs a tracheotomy, a procedure you don't know how to perform), or physical conditions (you're on a rescue team for victim extraction but you've got a bad back). Regardless of the cause, you must keep yourself, your buddy, and your

teammates safe and pass the relevant information up the chain of command so that the proper resources can be dispatched. And don't be discouraged if you have some physical limitation (bum knee, fainting at the sight of blood) that prevents you from doing each and every job your CERT might be called on to do. Rest assured that in a full-scale disaster, there will be more than enough opportunities to help out in any number of capacities, regardless of your level of training or physical condition. Every CERT member has a place in the organization.

6. Thou shalt always stay up, up, and away. This has nothing to do with the hit song by the Fifth Dimension or what Superman says when leaping tall buildings. Rather, it has to do with the real estate agent's credo: location, location, location. Specifically, it refers to staying *uphill*, *upwind*, and *away* from hazards when setting up your CERT operations, such as the treatment area, staging area, or command post. You want to stay uphill so that your operations area isn't inundated with floodwaters or contaminated by leaking HAZMAT containers. You want to stay upwind so that smoke or toxic fumes don't blow back into your face. And you want to stay far enough away so as not to be caught up in an unexpected explosion or building collapse. (A tragic example of the latter case occurred on September 11, when the New York City Fire Department set up their command post in the lobby of the World Trade Center.) In short, always locate your operations where they can not be adversely impacted by the emergency you're handling.

7. Thou shalt always follow directions from above. We're not talking about heavenly commands from the Almighty

here. The CERT emergency response to a disaster is an *organized team effort*. It all depends on one person taking charge, developing a plan of action (though not necessarily on his or her own), delegating responsibilities, creating teams to handle specific functions, and handing out assignments. All of the team's work is performed through a chain of command where every CERT member has one, and only one, boss. There is no such thing as "busy work" in a disaster; every job that every team is given is critical to the success of the incident response plan, whether it's fire suppression, triage, radio communication, scribe, or any other role. If individuals decide that they just don't want to perform their assigned tasks, they risk not only the success of the response but also the safety of the responders. Therefore, each person on each team must either complete his or her assigned task or notify the supervisor or supervisors (right on up to the incident commander) of why the job can't be done (too dangerous, not enough resources, etc.). That way, if an assigned task isn't completed, the person in charge can make the appropriate changes to the response plan.

8. Thou shalt never freelance or cowboy. This CERTmandment is closely related to the seventh, insofar as every CERT member is acting as part of an organized team response, not as an individual. "Freelancing" is the exact opposite of teamwork. This happens when one or more CERT responders go off on their own and do whatever they want, without consideration of the incident response plan. Not only are these rogue responders failing to contribute to the organized effort, their actions may actually work *against* the planned response. Furthermore, since they're operating outside of the chain of

command, if something were to happen to them no one else would think to help them or even know where to find them if they got into trouble. In fact, no one would ever even know they were in trouble. "Cowboys" may operate within the incident plan and the chain of command, but they do so without proper regard for their own safety (first CERTmandment) or their personal limitations (fifth CERTmandment). These people are the ones trying to hack vents through the roof of a burning building or convinced they can perform a tracheotomy because they saw it done on *ER*. Both freelancers and cowboys are a danger to themselves and those around them, and they fail to contribute to an effective emergency response.

9. Thou shalt always know the score. In short, keep track of everything that's going on. We always do an initial "size-up" (third CERTmandment), whether we're dealing with the entire incident or an individual victim. However, emergency response deals with fluid, ever-changing situations and circumstances, and we don't want anyone or anything falling through the cracks. We must constantly reevaluate the circumstances we're facing, so that we can appropriately adapt our response: Who's on what team and which teams are still in the building? Are any of the victims in the treatment area getting worse? Are we running low on supplies? Is that fire getting bigger? Is the building losing structural integrity? As long as we consistently and constantly reexamine our situation, we won't be faced with any nasty, avoidable surprises, and neither responders nor the victims they're helping will get lost in the shuffle.

10. Thou shalt always be prepared—just like good Boy Scouts. This is the best

way for us to be true to the first CERTmandment. Following this CERTmandment begins way before any real emergency occurs, when we are running through our preparation checklists: Do we have three to five days' worth of food, water, and other necessary supplies? Does everyone in the family know the home evacuation plan and how we'll reunite afterwards? Is there enough gas in the car? Have I strapped down and/or secured everything that could fall down or topple over during an earthquake? Do I know the locations of alternative exits? Do I have batteries for my flashlight? Is my fire extinguisher charged? Have I practiced

my response skills at a CERT drill? Being prepared means having all the necessary supplies, equipment, training, and planning already finalized before disaster strikes, eliminating the need to try and figure things out while all hell's breaking loose. Even beyond that, preparedness allows you the peace of mind, even during a catastrophic event (earthquake, tornado, hurricane, etc.), that comes with the knowledge that you and your family (and quite possibly your home) will survive.

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