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Review of *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs*

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Abstract

Review of *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs* By Lucien G. Canton, CEM. By taking a different perspective on local government emergency management programs, this book presents the vision for a very different model—one that includes an independent emergency manager leading an enterprise-wide program focused on strategies that promote disaster resilient communities.

**KEYWORDS:** emergency, disaster, 9/11, Katrina, DHS

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Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs
By Lucien Canton
349 pp., preface, bibliography
$79.95, (hardback)

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“Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs” by Lucien Canton is all about looking at emergency management from a different perspective. Many texts about emergency management focus on the actions that define an emergency management program – i.e., the four phases and all-hazards planning. The structure and construction of the program itself are added as an afterthought, if they are included at all. Instead of being organized along those traditional lines, this book is organized by the components required to establish an effective and comprehensive emergency management program – assessing risk, developing strategies, and managing crisis.

A lot of this is pretty standard fare from general management and planning fields, but this book talks specifically to the special needs of a disaster/emergency/continuity program at a government jurisdictional level. And if the book has one failing, that is it – its discussions are specifically targeted to local government agencies. The first sentence in Canton’s Preface says, “This is not the book I planned to write.” With his background in military, security, FEMA, and as director of emergency services for the City/County of San Francisco (he calls himself a “dinosaur”), he intended to write a book that would be relevant and inclusive of both the public and the private sector. His decision to focus on the public sector was because the subtle nuances between the two would have made the book awkward to write and read. As an emergency management professional, I do understand. However, I would sincerely like to see future books that not only take a similar look at the structure of business continuity programs in the private sector, but compare and contrast the two.

Cornerstones of Emergency Management

Canton lays the groundwork for his discussion of what makes an effective emergency management program around three pillars and weaves their influence throughout the book (1-2):
1. **A knowledge of history** – What happened, what is likely to happen again, and how others dealt with it. We all know the first step in any emergency management program is to identify and analyze risk, and you can’t do that without examining the history of a jurisdiction or entity. Canton looks at the historically reactive approach to emergency management here in the US -- from the 1802 fires in Portsmouth, New Hampshire (the first time Congress made federal resources available for local disaster relief) to today (over-funding terrorism to the exclusion of natural hazards after 9-11).

2. **An understanding of social science** – Why people react the way they do, and why some systems succeed and others fail. Canton describes this as an “overlooked tool” (36) for many emergency managers for several reasons. Academics and researchers generally write for each other and don’t make what they do relevant or practical for this field. On the other hand, many emergency managers came up through a civil defense background and are not aware or interested in what they see as abstract or impractical information. What social science research provides to the effective emergency management program is an understanding of how the public perceives risk, the impact of a disaster on community functions and political processes, and facts to debunk some of the more popular disaster myths, i.e. antisocial behavior during a disaster.

3. **Specialized technical expertise** – How a crisis is managed during an immediate response, as well as how to build strategies that reduce risk and build community resilience. Canton’s vision is that this expertise “… encompasses the specialized knowledge and skills used by the emergency manager to translate the lessons of history and social science into effective programs and plans” (63).

### The Emergency Manager and the Emergency Management Program

The nexus for Canton’s book is wrapped around his vision of the ideal emergency manager – which is “… no longer that of a technocrat with highly specialized skills in emergency response, but is rather that of an administrator with responsibility for overseeing the development of an enterprise-wide emergency management program” (Preface).

Comprehensive emergency management, as defined by FEMA in its training programs, describes an integrated program that includes a number of elements – everything from hazard assessment and resource management to logistics, training, and finance. Emergency managers are very often expected to
be able to understand and perform all those tasks. Canton argues that no single person can have the specialized knowledge necessary to effectively implement all those elements. I absolutely agree based on my experience - expecting any single person to do so is inviting disaster.

Canton argues that an integrated emergency management program “should no longer be viewed as the responsibility of a single individual or office, but rather as an enterprise-wide program” (85). The responsibility for the program then rests with the chief elected officer, the emergency manager provides oversight and guidance, and specific tasks are the responsibility of tactical specialists throughout the organization. This creates a paradigm very much different from what exists in most jurisdictions today, where there usually aren’t formal emergency management programs, and where emergency management is “… viewed as something outside day to day government and, at best, a necessary drain on resources that could be used elsewhere” (75).

The ideal position for an emergency manager, according to Canton, is as a key staff to the senior official of the jurisdiction. Generally, “… the further the program coordinator is removed from the chief executive officer, the less effective the emergency management program.” The advantage of creating a enterprise-wide emergency management program, led by an emergency manager who has access to the executive office, is that is puts all the disparate initiatives and programs related to the program into a manageable framework. It places the emergency manager as a neutral party, separate from partisan issues, with the ability to resolve conflicts, reduce risk, and increase the response capacity of the jurisdictions. This is what can create a truly resilient community with the ability and capacity to both respond and recovery from disasters.

The first step in that process is the creation of the strategic plan which “…coordinates the actions of multiple agencies and groups toward a unified vision of community resilience” (126). There is a graphic in the front of this book that lays out a visual concept for the sequence and relationship necessary for the strategic planning process Canton describes at great length. In this graphic, the strategic plan is the base which supports the rest of the necessary program strategies: the preparedness strategy that supports the response strategy, and the recovery and mitigation strategies that flow into the response strategy.

The Impact of Homeland Security

Throughout this book, Canton uses changes brought about by recent disasters (specifically 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina) to illustrate specific elements that inhibit the creation of effective programs – lack of focus on strategic program development, institutionalizing disaster myths, and creating unrealistic public expectations.
The early history of emergency management in the U.S. centers on the formation of FEMA in 1979, which was an attempt to move emergency management away from its Civil Defense, response and plan-centric roots. Instead of focusing on rudimentary procedures like writing response plans or conducting drills, emergency management programs were encouraged to think strategically about an all-hazards approach to their programs and how to make their communities more disaster resistant. Even though terrorism and security had always been part of this all-hazard approach to emergency management, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center brought changes that resonated through the emergency management community. Canton notes, “Almost immediately, over 50 years of evolution in emergency management were casually dismissed with the stock phrase ‘the world has changed’” (25). Instead of developing resilience to future disasters, local and state government emergency management programs were struggling to implement new guidelines (NIMS, NPR, TLC) and the complex grant management process that came with them.

The reorganization that created the Department of Homeland Security stripped FEMA of staff and funding, while concentrating power into a strong, centralized command and control model. This institutionalized one of the more popular disaster myths at a federal level – that disasters lead to a breakdown of social norms and structures at the local government level. Canton writes that this myth is an extension of individual behavior applied to organizations. He states, “It is assumed that, since workers are traumatized, organizations will be unable to function, leading to an inability to make decisions” (55). In this archetype, local communities are unable to function without guidance and need a strong, central authority to keep them safe.

Creating DHS, refocusing priorities from all-hazards resilience to terrorism, and weakened emergency management programs overall were, Canton writes, “…a recipe for disaster in Hurricane Katrina” (27) and “… demonstrated with uncompromising harshness how far the level of preparedness in the US has been allowed to decay since September 11 …” (29). While the adage that “all disasters are local” was never completely abandoned, neither were efforts to enhance local capabilities supported.

However, Canton acknowledges that the breakdown in Hurricane Katrina was not the failure of government as much as an exaggerated public expectation of what government can do. “In some sense, emergency managers at all levels are victims of their own success,” Canton writes (31). History shows us that U.S. government response to disasters has increased the public’s demand for protection from disasters. Local government – especially the direct public response organizations like fire, police and EMS – has been especially successful in meeting this expectation. Canton says this has “… created a public perception that the government has inexhaustible resources that can be brought to bear

immediately in any crisis.” (31). That public expectation was badly shaken during the events that following Hurricane Katrina, which has opened political discussions about what government can and can’t do to protect the public.

**Conclusion**

Like many of my colleagues, I have seen a great many changes in the emergency management profession in the past twenty years – changes that are steadily raising it to the level of a recognized career and field of study, complete with degrees and certifications. The value of having an independent and neutral position to administer an institution-wide plan for emergency/continuity management – especially as disasters and their impacts are increasing exponentially – is quietly being adopted at all levels of government.

This book is the first to define what an emergency management program should look like, along with a comprehensive guide for how to get it there. Canton’s writes that “the best emergency managers have already adapted to this concept or are on their way to doing so” (Preface). It would behoove everyone responsible for the protection of the public – emergency managers, public officials and elected representatives – to do the same.