

Embracing Emergency Management: The Benefits to Fire Service Senior Leadership

Mario D. Rueda

NEMAA Paper.Riverside.Rueda.April.2019

April 1, 2019

Abstract

This paper concentrates on the benefits to Fire Department Senior Leadership through a better understanding and embracing of emergency management. The education provided by emergency management, in many cases, may provide Senior Fire Service Executives with the why, because of the context created by understanding the before, during and the impacts after an event. Specifically, Fire Department Senior Leadership benefits by development of the skill of sense making; improved understanding of the community, economic, social and political influences; and the development of a strategic view during novel, escalating, or large scale emergencies. This skill, perspective, and understanding are critical to ensuring Senior Fire Service Executives expand and grow their perspective as first responders, maintain a strategic leadership role and make the best incident management decisions.

The research methodologies used include both a literature review and interviews with executive level first responders who are presently or have previously worked as emergency managers. Those interviewed support the assertion that education and experience in emergency management helps develop an important incident management skill, a richer and more complete incident management view, and results in the ability to maintain a broader strategic view of emergencies.

One challenge to Fire Department Senior Leadership embracing emergency management is the strong cultural fire service draw to the tactical level. However, while safe, effective tactics are critical to successful incident outcomes, as the scope of the incident expands, effective incident management and decision making by Fire Department Senior Leadership has to rise from and beyond the tactical level.

Overview

The fire service has provided America's emergency response needs since 1736 when Benjamin Franklin co-founded the Union Fire Company (Ben Franklin History, 2014). Today's modern Fire Departments provide emergency services from neighborhood fire stations. The fire service's regular and customary emergency workload of emergency medical services, fire suppression, and rescue is critical and important to communities. However, the fire service also provides first response to unique, escalating, and large scale crisis. Crisis emergencies are distinguished from more common routine emergencies by significant elements of novelty (Howitt-Leonard 2005, page 5). While rare, these emergencies are more common than they used to be, in fact, the Office of the United States Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) reported that total natural disaster reported each year has been steadily increasing in recent decades (Than, 2005). These emergencies extend well beyond emergency response, and Fire Service Senior Executives benefit greatly from understanding the tenants of emergency management. Emergency management not only covers response, but also the four core areas of prevention, protection, mitigation, and recovery (FEMA, 2017).

In a 35- year emergency response career spanning, from the ranks of Firefighter responder to Fire Service Senior Executive, the author's awareness of the importance of all aspects of emergency response has grown significantly. The recent fire service response to large scale disasters in our Nation is nothing short of heroic, but not without criticism. A Los Angeles Times investigation found that prior to the Camp Fire, the City of Paradise ignored repeated warnings of the risk its residents faced, crafted no plan to effectuate a singular complete evacuation of the area, entrusted public alerts to a system prone to fire, and failed to sound a

citywide order to flee, even as a hail of fire rained down (St. John, P., Serna, J., Lin II, R.G. 2018).

In a December 30, 2018 Los Angeles Times article regarding the Camp Fire entitled, “Why Paradise was Doomed?”, the Town Engineer, lamented, “I don’t want to say, no, we weren’t prepared because we worked so hard.” He continued, “And what would have been different? I just don’t know” (St. John, P., Serna, J., Lin II, R.G. 2018). Answering what would have been different on the day of any response may lie in whether Fire Service Senior Executive’s embrace and understand the importance of emergency management.

Methodology

The research methodology for this paper included an internet search for relevant articles connected to fire service responses to recent large scale disasters, fire service industry publications related to the fire service engagement in emergency management, a review of published documents from the Homeland Security Digital Library at the Naval Post Graduate School, structured interviews with one current emergency manager and one former emergency manager with experience as Fire Service Senior Executives, and a review of books with specific emphasis on emergency management concepts, and fire service culture. One challenge in this research is the absence of existing literature by or interview of individuals with both, experience at the emergency manager level accompanied by Incident Command and Senior Fire Service Executive experience.

Results and Findings

Emergency management plays a much broader role during emergencies that extends well beyond traditional fire service roles of firefighting, emergency medical services, and rescue.

Emergency management includes disaster preparedness, hazard mitigation to reduce the impacts of disasters, protection against acts of terrorism, and response and recovery missions including restoring lifelines and basic services.

The 9/11 attacks sounded an alarm in fire departments across the country; suddenly, they needed to consider whether or not they had a role to play in preparing for and preventing terrorist attacks (Gartenstein-Ross, Dabruzzo, 2008). Since 9/11, many fire departments have made significant investments in the homeland security mission, including the Fire Department of New York (FDNY). According to the FDNY Terrorism and Disaster Preparedness Strategy, “the Department has begun to assess the kinds of emergencies we may have to face, the kinds of training we will need and the equipment we’ll require, the technologies, the strategies, the procedures. We have begun to shape the premier fire department for the 21st century” (FDNY, Terrorism and Disaster Preparedness Strategy, 2007). The traditional, tactical approach is not well-aligned with the expansion in mission to include the prevention of terror attacks and or responding to crisis emergencies. With the expansion of responsibility needs to come an expansion of skills and mindset brought to the job. Emergency management is a natural complement to the fire service. Sadly, the 2003 Cedar fire in San Diego County, at the time the largest in the State of California’s history, did not further sound the alarm throughout the fire service for Senior Fire Service Executives to fully embrace emergency management (Churchill, 2004).

While researching this paper three benefits to Fire Service Senior Executives from embracing emergency management emerged; (1) Development of the skill of sense making during novel, escalating, or large scale emergencies (2) improved understanding of the greater

community, economic, social and political factors, and (3) development of a more robust strategic perspective during emergency incident management.

Improved Skill of Sense Making

Fire Service Senior Executives benefit from the embrace of emergency management through the development of sense making skills during the initial chaos of novel, escalating, and large scale emergencies. Weick (1995) argues that sensemaking is about such things as placement of items into frameworks, comprehending, redressing surprise, constructing meaning, interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding, and development of patterns, the concept of sensemaking is well named because, literally, it means the making of sense.

After 9/11, the National Incident Management System (NIMS) was intended to bring responders together from a multitude of emergency response disciplines through a framework of command positions and checklists. Unfortunately, in the dynamic phases of novel, escalating large scale events, chaos and a very low situational awareness are normal. Joseph Pfeifer, the first New York City Fire Department Chief Officer on scene at 9/11, recognized in his Naval Post graduate School thesis, a specific part of a large-scale event that he labeled “the initial hours of a terrorist attack.” He defined sense making as, “the ability to construct meaning from the information received. For decision makers, making sense of real-time information is necessary for maintaining an accurate understanding of the evolving situation (Pfeifer, 2005).”

Following 9/11, NIMS was created as one response to this initial phase of an emergency, and is an effective part of the solution for structuring and organizing multiple response entities. NIMS offers a starting point by developing a framework utilizing common terminology and established responsibilities, and should continue to be mastered by Fire Service Senior

Executives. However, beyond implementation of a NIMS organization, how do Fire Service Senior Executives know what to do when they encounter, and are responsible for a novel, escalating or large scale emergency? As explained by Gary Klein, a fire service commander's experience has provided him with a firm set of patterns. In the simple version of the Recognition Prime Decision (RPM) model, the situation is sized up, and commanders immediately know how to proceed, including which goals to pursue, what to expect, and how to respond (Klein, 2017).

What happens when one's experience does not provide for something recognizable, or if there is no recognizable pattern? Incident Commanders responding to the initial stages of a novel, escalating or large scale emergency may very well be faced with a catastrophe they have never encountered, or one never before seen by the response community. Making sense of the situation may be critical to the lives of responders and the public.

According to David J. Snowden, the time has come for modern leaders to broaden their traditional approach to leadership and decision making. Working with other contributors, Snowden developed the Cynefin Framework, which allows executives across all disciplines to see things from new viewpoints, assimilate complex concepts, and address problems. Snowden advocates that when faced with novelty, instead of searching for the correct answer for what needs to be done when faced with novelty, decision makers may have to think in terms of what questions to ask to better understand the situation before pursuing a right answer. There may be several right answers (Snowden, 2007). David Snowden's ideas are part of the emergency management curriculum shared at the Naval Post Graduate School's Executive Leader's Program, Monterey, California.

The benefits to Fire Service Senior Executives of exposure to emergency management are important. According to Mr. James Featherstone, former Interim Los Angeles Fire Chief, former General Manager for the City of Los Angeles Emergency Management Department and current Executive Director of the Homeland Security Advisory Council, “The fire service has traditionally relied on training within the fire service industry. Although fire service training is important to incident outcomes, senior fire service leadership also benefit greatly from education, including emergency management.” Featherstone added, “...it wasn’t until I became involved in emergency management that I observed that the education I received through this engagement expanded my thought processes and provided new experiences from the training I had traditionally received in the fire service that was intended to perfect my performance of specific tasks, rules, tools, or procedures” (Personal communication, James Featherstone February 23, 2019).

Along with NIMS, incident command training, experience, best practices, lessons learned, simulations and debriefs, understanding preparedness, mitigation, prevention, response, and recovery by engagement in emergency management provides a greater opportunity for Fire Service Senior Executives to develop sense-making skills and an accelerated understanding of an emerging situation, yielding better incident command decisions. The author cannot think of a more critical issue, than identifying how to develop those who will be first on-scene at large scale, escalating and landscape critical incidents tasked with bringing order to and working through the initial chaos of a novel, escalating, or large scale emergency. This paper argues that embracing emergency management by Senior Fire Service Executives will help improve the skill of sense making and should be part of that development.

Improved Understanding of the Community, Economic, Social and Political Factors

The wake-up call for the entire fire service to embrace and understand emergency management should have been the Cedar Fire of 2003. The Cedar Fire, started on October 25, 2003 at 5:37 PM. Significant Santa Ana winds were predicted for that evening in the San Diego area(Churchill, 2004). According to FEMA, the decision to activate the San Diego County Operational Area Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was made by the County Office of Emergency Services Director at 5:20 AM on October 26, nearly 12 hours after the start of the incident. FEMA concluded that the EOC “experienced a critical lack of timely information on fire location and behavior, especially during the first day when the fire was moving so rapidly. The lack of a Fire Operations Branch Leader increased the EOC’s struggle to gain real time information on the progress and direction of the rapidly moving fire. The lack of up-to-date information created problems in the assignment of police to assist in evacuations (FEMA, 2004).” Contrast the events of 2003 with the San Diego County Firestorms of 2007. The initial 2007 wildfire (“Harris Fire”) started at approximately 9:23 AM Pacific Standard Time (PST) on Sunday, October 21, 2007, and was fueled by Santa Ana winds. The fire was reported to the Operational Area Emergency Operations Center (OAEOC) personnel at approximately 9:55 AM PST. At 11:16 AM, the OAEOC was activated to a Level 1 and, within minutes, AlertSanDiego notified emergency management personnel to respond to the OAEOC (San Diego County Firestorms AAR, 2007). Understanding the challenges and complexity of the problems associated with evacuating large populations at the 2003 Cedar Fire may have led to Fire Service Senior Executives re-prioritizing the role and importance of the EOC, a decision which would almost certainly have been impacted by a greater embrace and understanding of emergency management.

Not only must Fire Service Senior Executives consider what right questions to ask when faced with a novel, escalating, large scale emergency, but they must also direct a safe and effective emergency response. As previously discussed, understanding and embracing emergency management provides tremendous benefit to Fire Service Senior Executives during the initial chaos of these events. Fire Service Senior Executives also benefit from understanding the different facets of emergency management, extending beyond response to include the before, during, and after as represented by preparedness, mitigation, prevention, and recovery.

As every escalating, novel, large scale, or landscape incident progresses, Fire Service Senior Executives face many issues involving consideration of both tactics and policy. When asked about distinguishing between strategy/Policy issues and tactical/operational issues in his Congressional Homeland Security Committee testimony, Harvard Professor, Herman B. “Dutch” Leonard stated, “In a crisis situation, some of the issues raise policy questions that should be answered by elected political leaders, while other issues are more tactical and operational.” Leonard continues, “NIMS focuses almost exclusively on the resolution of tactical issues, more attention needs to be devoted in the doctrine to make this distinction.” Leonard concludes, “It is imperative for NIMS to provide more guidance about the process by which tactical commanders should work in conjunction with elected leaders” (Leonard, Snider, Baker, 2014).

This paper supports the contention that the depth and breadth of emergency management education, in addition to the qualification processes in place for incident management, is one of the solutions to ensuring that Senior Fire Service Executives understand the additional considerations necessarily undertaken when making seemingly tactical decisions which overlap with political, economic and social issues. The lens elected leaders view such incidents through may very well be an important perspective for Senior Fire Service Executives to consider;

however, embracing the understanding provided by the depth and breadth of emergency management education is an equally important lens for use by Senior Fire Service Executives.

In the author's experience, Fire Service Senior Executives are confronted with a variety of situations during their careers; most, however, involve how to rescue, confine fires, and how to organize the effort. The education provided by emergency management, in many cases, could provide Senior Fire Service Executives with the why, because of the context created by understanding the before, during and the impacts after an event. This belief is bolstered by Jeff Reeb, former Operations Chief for the Long Beach Fire Department, and the current Emergency Manager for the County of Los Angeles. Reeb states, "As a Firefighter and even as a Junior Officer, my actions centered on achieving the traditional emergency incident priorities of saving life, property, and the environment, or more simply put, focusing on the tactical fire suppression and rescue operations that tended to occur "inside the yellow barricade tape." It was not until I became a Senior Chief Officer, and was exposed to the disruptions and impacts that those incidents had "outside the yellow tape," that I became aware of the secondary and tertiary impacts of those incidents. These impacts which effect housing availability, economic recovery, and the restoration of public and private infrastructure are key mission areas in the field of emergency management" (Personal communication, Jeff Reeb February 21, 2019).

Development of Strategic View by Senior Fire Service Leadership

The United States Army differentiates strategic leaders from those leading at the tactical and operational level in its Army Field Manual. The Manual states, "Strategic leaders face uncertainty, ambiguity and volatility" (Army Field Manual 22-100, 2016). In practice, the distinction is not so clear. Assessing risk, knowledge of tactics, the ability to manage large

organizations and direct supervision of subordinates remain requirements of Fire Service Senior Executives. However, Fire Service Senior Executives are also expected to make decisions in a complex, politically or jurisdictionally fragmented environment where the search for right answer may be difficult. Strategy may ultimately be driven by political, legal, jurisdictional, as well as tactical considerations. Fire Service Senior Executives are much better positioned to consider strategic interests when they embrace a more complete view provided by emergency management education.

In the Testimony concerning aiding senior operational commanders to resist being unduly pulled toward tactical decision-making and away from advising political leaders on strategic issues, Herman B. “Dutch” Leonard said, “the natural flow of work in incident management structures tends to exert a strong pull on the senior commanders of operational agencies toward being involved in tactical decision making.” In concluding his remarks, Leonard emphasized, “The attention of senior operational officials is a key resource for both tactical and strategic issues, so we need to develop better doctrine and associated training about how to focus and parse their concentration” (Leonard 2014). Arguably, the understanding of the before, during, and after novel, escalating, large scale emergencies provides a richer perspective from which Senior Fire Service Executives may make emergency incident decisions. The study, exposure to, and embrace of emergency management can help fill that gap.

Lessons Learned

While it would be difficult to measure the true benefit gained by Fire Service Senior Executives who embrace emergency management in commanding emergencies, the research conducted and the information presented in this paper confirm the author’s belief that value is

significant. Embracing emergency management generates improved sense-making skills during the early, chaotic stages of major incidents; improved understanding of incident management influences by the community, economic, social and political factors, and improves attention on strategic issues by Senior Fire Service Executives. This research has confirmed the author's commitment to continuing to pursue emergency management education.

Future research should examine the benefit to Fire Service Senior Executives of the inclusion of operational experience in an emergency operations center. While Fire Service Senior Executives assess risk, possess knowledge of tactics and are capable in the management of large responder organization, this breadth of experience will only be further enhanced through experience gained from direct participation in a more structured emergency management environment. That same experience gained in an emergency operations center may be necessary as part of that embrace of emergency management.

Summary

This paper concentrated on the benefits to Fire Department Senior Leadership building skill, expanding and growing their perspective as first responders, and maintaining a strategic leadership role through understanding and embracing emergency management. How quickly and accurately first responding Fire Service Senior Executives make sense of an emerging situation is difficult to measure, but it appears understanding what happens before, during and after a novel, escalating, large scale emergency certainly shortens that time frame.

The paper also discussed how experience in emergency management helps develop a richer and more complete incident management view. Exposure to elected officials, and

understanding the interests of secondary responders and others brings a different lens through which to view a particular set of circumstances.

Finally, this paper discussed the need for Fire Service Senior Executives to avoid being drawn into a tactical level of incident management. Developing an understanding of all aspects of emergency response afforded by emergency management offers a path to resist being pulled unduly toward tactical decision making by understanding the before, during and after the novel, escalating large scale emergency.

References

- Churchill, B. W. (April 22, 2004). Emergency Management Case Study: Southern California Firestorms 2003 [Electronic Version]. *American Military University*. Retrieved February 9, 2019 from <https://www.oasis-open.org/committees/download.php/26807/Firestorm%202003%20Case%20Study%20-%20Final.pdf>
- County of San Diego. (February 2007) 2007 San Diego County Firestorms After Action Report, Retrieved February 5, 2019 from https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/oes/docs/2007_SanDiego_Fire_AAR_Main_Document_FINAL.pdf.
- Federal Emergency Management Agency. (May 2, 2018). Mission Areas. Retrieved February 4, 2019 from <http://www.fema.gov/mission-areas>.
- Gartenstein-Ross, D. & Dabruzzo, K. (August 1, 2008). Firefighters' Developing Role in Counterterrorism, *Policing Terrorism Report, Manhattan Institute*. Retrieved January 28, 2019 from https://media4manhattan-institute.org/pdf/ptr_03.pdf
- Howitt, A. & Leonard, H. (2009). *Managing Crisis: Responses to Large-Scale Emergencies*. Washington D.C.: CQ Press.
- Leonard, H., Snider, E., & Baker, G. (April 9, 2014). *Testimony provided to the House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee Hearing on: The Boston Marathon Bombing, One Year On: A Look Back to Look Forward*. Retrieved January 28, 2019

Mario D. Rueda

from <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM00/20140409/102091/HHRG-113-HM00-Wstate-LeonardH-20140409.pdf>

Pfeifer, J. (September, 2005). Command Resiliency: An Adaptive Response Strategy for Complex Incidents. *Naval Postgraduate School*. Retrieved January 28, 2019 from <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=457321>

Rainey, J. (November 13, 2018). Paradise Fire survivors say warnings were too little, too late. *NBC News*. Retrieved January 28, 2019 from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/paradise-fire-survivors-say-warnings-were-too-little-too-late-n935846>

Sergent, J., Petras, G., Gelles K. & Bacon J. (November 20, 2018). 3 Startling facts about California's Camp Fire. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/11/20/camp-fire-3-startling-facts/2064758002/>

Snowden, D. J. & Boone, M. E. (2007). A Leader's Framework for Decision Making. *Harvard Business Review*. (November 2007), pages 1-3. Retrieved January 30, 2019 from <https://hbr.org/2007/11/a-leaders-framework-for-decision-making>

St. John, P., Serna J. & Lin II, R.G., (December 30, 2018). Why Paradise was doomed. *Los Angeles Times*.

Terrorism and Disaster Preparedness Strategy. (2007). Retrieved February 4, 2019 from www.nyc.gov/html/fdny/pdf/events/2007/tdps/terrorism%20strategy_complete.pdf.

Union Fire Company. (n.d.). *Benjamin Franklin Historical Society*, Retrieved February 1, 2019 from www.benjamin-franklin-history.org/union-fire-company/

Mario D. Rueda

Than, K, (2005). Scientists: Natural Disaster Becoming More Common. *Live Science*, pages 1-3.

Retrieved February 1, 2019 from <https://www.livescience.com/414-scientists-natural-disasters-common.html>

U.S. Army. (2016). Army Field Manual FM 22-100, (The U.S. Army Leadership Field Manual).

Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com Publishing.

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Attachment A

The Benefits to the Fire Service Senior Leadership Embracing Emergency Management

Questions:

1. In your experience, what is the greatest benefit you received professionally from your exposure to the discipline of emergency management?
2. Which aspects of emergency management helped you understand your complete role as a fire incident commander?
3. Do you have an awareness now that you may have previously focused on tactics as opposed to broader issues?
4. What education/training in emergency management has been most beneficial to your growth?
5. Can you now recall events in your career that may have been approached differently if you had the lens that you have now that includes emergency management?
6. What advice would you give to Fire Chiefs about how the education and training might include the broader issues of emergency management?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add to this discussion based upon the unique experience and background you bring to this topic?