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Review of Managing Crises: Responses to Large-Scale Emergencies

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Managing Crises: Responses to Large-Scale Emergencies. By Arnold M. Howitt and Herman B. Leonard, editors, with David Giles. Washington: CQ Press, 2009, 350pp., \$49.95 (paperback) ISBN 978-0872895706.

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This is an exceptionally well-written and edited book dealing with crisis management and emergency preparedness response change and improvement. The book is lengthy, but flows and reads smoothly. It will be useful for instructional purposes, and should be valuable as a resource of research themes and projects. The book is the product of a substantial collaborative effort extending over a period of time, involving the contributions of many academicians, emergency practitioners, and others including graduate students. The effort has produced a powerful initial conceptual map to guide the paradigmatic change that now is necessary to prepare and respond effectively to the large-scale, potentially catastrophic, events looming in our collective future.

The intent of the editors is straightforward - to fill the gap between two main genres of work in the field. They set out to accomplish this daunting task by considering the work focusing on "...developing more general frameworks..." and the work producing "...quite detailed treatments of individual crisis events." (xiv)

The editors take the view that as sound as much of this work is, it cannot in either category provide students with the descriptive depth and conceptual framework needed to guide the educational preparation and eventual experiential refinement to promote the creation of public value in the new, challenging environments and circumstances we all confront. This view applies, in various degrees, to emergency managers, the traditional responder community, policy leaders and elected officials at all levels of government, and to many other kinds of involved stakeholders and stakeholder groups engaged in preparedness and response. (xv)

Hence, the fundamental purpose of the book is to combine fresh concepts and in-depth cases to produce a "...more satisfying examination of the key features of crisis management and leadership." (xv)

The book is organized in five parts, each focusing on the challenges and emergent design parameters associated with a major theme:

Part I focuses on the dilemmas of crisis management

Part II addresses structuring crisis response

Part III explores adapting to novelty

Part IV deals with improving performance, and
Part V covers anticipating disaster: event planning

In Part I, which is an overview, the dilemmas, challenges, and scope of concern of the book are laid out. Emergency response is identified as a “distinctive public management problem” made all the more critical by the kinds of situations that seem to be happening with increasing frequency. (pgs. 2-3) The view is that the limitations inherent in the present approach are essentially attributable to the focus of the approach on routines and pattern recognition. They make the argument that both the emergence of increasingly challenging situations and the continued focus on routine have led to a variety of critical challenges. In the place of this focus on routine, the editors argue that the emergencies of the future require a major change in how we think about, prepare for, and respond. As a means of moving directly into an initial framing of this major change, they explore key weaknesses and limitations that are a part of our present emergency management system, or paradigm.

CHALLENGES

One key challenge is determining the need for and a way of recognizing novelty and improvising an effective response to urgent circumstances. Novelty, in various manifestations, is defined as the basis of the distinction between routine emergencies and crisis emergencies. The focus on this distinction is found throughout the book, with two major cases focused specifically on it.

Scalability and surge capacity are related issues posing a key challenge to responders and policymakers. Clearly, the need to improve surge capacity in various areas involves difficult resource allocation choices, and the need to set a balance between the likelihood of large events in consideration of other values.

Next addressed is the need for situational awareness. This concept is important in our present process, but the argument is that complexity, scale, and novelty issues in recent emergencies render effective situational awareness very difficult.

The need for integrated execution in real time is important, and recent policies and focus is encouraging; however, the editors take the view that maintaining response effectiveness through integrated execution of response plans and adaptations across jurisdictions has become exceedingly demanding.

At some point, crises may become larger and more challenging than the capacities of the institutional framework constructed to deal with them. What seems to be missing is the need to determine the appropriate institutional changes and arrangements that can add to the political and value dimensions addressed in the response.

Handing off across boundaries is essential; however, as has been shown repeatedly in recent disasters, appropriate, effective mechanisms, including training, are not available or are too limited. The negative results for effective response are inescapable.

Finally, the capacity to plan in anticipation of crisis in major events is less effective than it could be, again posing a major challenge in the field.

Together these challenges are used to establish design parameters for considering improvements in how we deal with disaster response. They are explored in some detail at the beginning of each part of the book, and then are addressed empirically in the cases for each major theme. The editors discuss as well the kinds of changes that can help to improve emergency preparedness and response in difficult situations.

Following the initial material presented as an overview in Part I, the structure of the book follows this pattern: conceptual concerns associated with the challenge, the identification of a way to improve the situation (consistent with the design parameter), the specific identification of case issues, and the teaching/learning questions for the specific challenge being described. This is a very effective process for learning.

If one were to read only the conceptual material on these challenges, and the prospective means that could be used to meet them, the book would be an important contribution to the multidisciplinary effort to reshape our capacity to meet the needs of the future. It seems especially necessary to explain that these narratives draw heavily—and constructively—from traditional practice, theoretical and empirical scholarly work, and emergent views from various sources concerning needed changes in policy and practice.

CASES

For each key challenge, and the design concerns related, such as recognizing novelty and finding ways to improvise (including for Part I), the editors use cases of recent events and disasters. A variety of cases are used to explore, illustrate, and describe in detail the circumstances from which the challenges, and need for system changes, emerge. Some fifteen cases, with only Hurricane Katrina being addressed more than once, are presented. The cases enable a sound focus and explanation of each design parameter and the kinds of changes that need to be made to the model of emergency management presently in use. Most of the cases are descriptions of the dynamic processes of emergency response and emergency planning, and the difficulties tied to the intense circumstances in the event or type of event and the response to it. These cases are both well-researched, and well written. Varying in style of presentation, length, scope and detail, to fit the issue being addressed, they are highly readable. So, for example, the initial case in Part

I on Hurricane Katrina is longer than the others, while the cases on other issues vary but tend to be less lengthy. The editing work is superb and makes each case informative. It is easy to track back to the points presented earlier by the editors in their introductions, and it is also easy to push forward to the instructional questions they raise for students.

Even here, the cases alone offer much to students of emergency management---particularly considering the detailed observed experiences and practitioner insights involving decisions, and actions taken in response to virtually overwhelming circumstances generated by large-scale disasters.

CONSTRUCTIVE CONSIDERATIONS

Together, the discussions of the challenges, and the related design parameters and associated discussions, along with the cases, provide the reader with a very solid template for addressing systemic change and improvement. And, as stated earlier, the instructional value of this book is undeniably positive. There are several areas and future considerations more prompted by the book than addressed in it. Here are several such considerations:

First, some of the literature that could have been employed to make both challenges as described and the emergent design issues and teaching points stronger and richer appears not to have been incorporated from such areas as the existing crisis management and crisis leadership studies, and from the work on high reliability organizations.

Second, even given the length of the book in its present form, it would strengthen the instructional value of the material if some further material could have been included for the purpose, as it were, of completing the adult learner cycle. Specifically, this could include some scenario-based application cases that in many instances could help; adult learners transfer their new knowledge to their specific settings for use in practice. These scenarios, to some degree, could be of the “what if” type frequently employed in many class situations and used in various instructors reading this review essay.

Finally, I should say again that the book is a fine resource for future research themes and the ensuing improvements in emergency management practice. Some of this consideration is addressed at various locations in the book; however, the usefulness of the work in this manner would be more substantial if a few of these research themes were tied to the practice improvements that the book does in fact address.

This book represents a divergence and significant positive contribution to how we think about, plan for, and respond to large-scale emergencies. It can also help us improve how we respond to routine emergencies. The editors and all of the contributors have reason to be pleased with their effort. Hopefully, the lessons contained in this book will be learned by the many people in positions to bring about desperately needed changes.