

4: Mysterious Ways

During this process of building an incident scenario, the planning team identifies the requirements that determine actions and resources.

-FEMA's Comprehensive Preparedness Guide 101 [14]

The commander's thinking, foresight, instinct, experience, and visualization are particularly important during the early design effort, when identifying the true nature of a complex problem and designing an approach to the solution will drive subsequent planning and execution.

—General James N. Mattis, U.S. Joint Forces Command[16]

Goal

With potential response partners and your incident commander, determine the high-level Ways to resolve your problem and document it in the  **Emergency Management Planning Directive**.

Mission

Most plans move straight to tactical detail - which is then ignored during an emergency response. Instead, create a compelling theory of action that is owned by the senior executives who will manage the emergency response. With executives, define the vision for a credible *end state*, which is the finish line for declaring the problem solved. Agree of a set of high-level *lines of effort*, which are the major thrusts of your activities. Prioritize certain parts of both the problem and your response over other parts, resulting in defined *centers of gravity*. Compile this into a clear *mission narrative* that's understandable to those who haven't been involved in planning. This will give you a clear visualization of *Commander's Intent* – the **mysterious ways** that frame the more detailed planning process.

Operational Approach

- Ensure your strategic approach covers all phases of a disaster – mitigation, preparedness, recovery and response. If it's not systems-based, you'll miss something[35]. There should be no pure "response" plans.
- Coordinated action, not "communication", is actually the biggest problem in disaster response[22]. So design your strategies around radical coordination with the partners identified in the last phase.
- Open systems beat closed systems in responses. Convince commanders to integrate new outside resources, volunteers and citizen efforts that appear during the emergency [48].



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The  **Emergency Management Planning Directive** template summarizes the Commander's Intent you've gathered during *Plan Design* as guidance for more staff level work during *Planning*.

 Why are ways mysterious? They have to define clear strategies but leave room to improvise tactics.

 Healthcare systems in particular are likely to respond in isolation [6]; healthcare strategies that bring together facilities and insurance providers tend to be more successful[19].

Objectives

1. Reframe your *End State* from Phase Two. The desired end state consists of those conditions that, if achieved, represent the accomplishment of the mission.
2. Describe the main *Lines of Effort*. A functional way of connecting various actions together in a coordinated way towards an end state. Bigger than an operation or an objective. These lines of effort are interdependent and should mutually reinforce each other [20].
3. Prioritize by designating *Centers of Gravity* for your Mission and for the Problem you're trying to solve. A *Mission Center of Gravity* is the source of your strength on which your efforts depend. A *Problem Center of Gravity* is the point where your efforts must be directed to succeed. It could be geographic or a particular part of your operation. Examples:
4. With senior executives, build a visual **Theory of Action**. A Theory of Action is your Commander's visualization of the solution and what he wants to accomplish to get there[20]. This should inspire/focus the planning team and orient each operation by linking its purpose to a set of conditions that define the entire desired end state[9].
5. Create a concise *Mission Narrative* that is legible to someone outside the planning process (see note) below.
6. Combine these elements into an **Emergency Management Planning Directive** which your Incident Commander approves, which will guide all future planning. This create a shared view of the process among all players, which is critical to the success of the system[21].

📄 Selling the Mission Narrative

You must be able to brief the mission of your plan to outsiders in about twenty seconds. Mission Narratives are great for that. Dr. Jack Kem (Army War College) recommends a specific format for them which we've found very effective [49]. It works like this (see image at right) :

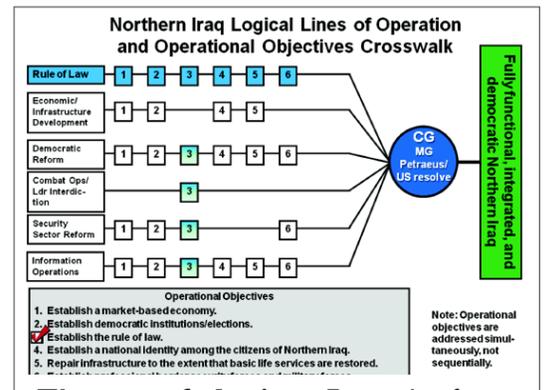
- **Condition** – Describe the conditions of the hazard that make the objective necessary (e.g., What's the problem?).
- **Opportunities** - What inside the hazard makes it possible for us to change the situation. This sentence should reference the objective directly (e.g., What can we address or leverage?).
- **Key Actions** – Two or three key actions that will be taken should be specifically spelled out (e.g., steps we'll take)
- **Payoff** – **This is the most important part.** Describe how the actions will change the original conditions in a way that external stakeholders will understand.

🧠 Don't start with the steps you want to take! First, you have to agree with you Incident Commander on when your mission is done.

🧠 Emergency Support Functions are a good example of "Line of Effort" thinking but don't always match what you need.

Mission Centers of Gravity
Public trust; arrival of medications; mayoral agreement w/objectives.

Problem Centers of Gravity
Coney Island, Level of Contagion,



Theory of Action Example from Jack Kem [3] based on 2010 U.S. Military Operations in Iraq



🧠 **Want an example?** I wrote each Mission Narrative in this handbook using this method.