

5: Three Choice Courses

Planners consider the requirements, goals, and objectives to develop several response alternatives. The art and science of planning helps determine how many solutions or alternatives to consider; however, at least two options should always be considered.

-FEMA Comprehensive Preparedness Guide 1010, 2010 [14]

Goal

Competitively design and debate strategies to achieve the mission until one emerges victorious.

Mission

Planning processes that only consider one solution miss both the complexity of the problem and the improvisational nature of leadership. Instead, create a process where multiple solutions compete against each other to create a set of winning strategies. Use your finished **Planning Directive** for guidance. First, have separate small groups create *Courses of Actions* – strategies for **what** emergency responders will do to accomplish the Commander's Visualization described in the Planning Directive. Then, evaluate each Course of Action to make sure it is plausible and effective. You'll have at least **three choice Courses of Action**. Competitively brief each one to executives and design a final set of flexible strategies based on their feedback. Stronger ideas will emerge from this competitive process and executives will be more likely to use a set of strategies which they developed.

Operational Approach

- The emergency manager can't just accept things as they are but must set a vision for the community to plan for and respond to a disaster as one connected network [21].
- Brainstorming Courses of Action reveals unexpected ideas. Also, as the count of considered Courses of Action increases, better solutions become more likely. Competition helps good ideas win out over bureaucratic groupthink[50].
- It's more important to address how the response will solve the problem than to address the problem itself. That is, plan how you will coordinate and make decisions, not treat particular types of injuries [12]. Specifics are for later.
- Your Courses of Action should surge day-to-day systems and hew closely to normal organizational strategies, not invent new systems [21], to increase their use by executives [51]. Any systems you do create should be easy for new players to understand and grab onto with their own improvised operations [52].



Write the Process ≠ Plan	1
Raise Wicked Problems	2
Capabilities Not Analogies	3
Coordinate don't Command	4
Strategize to Improvise	5
Write Reality	6
Be One Community	7
Slow the Burn	8
No myths	9
Think Management	10

🧠 Plan Design ➔ Planning

Until this point, you've been engaged in *Plan Design*, which is a Commander-driver dialog. Now, you begin *Planning* proper, in which your team takes the Commander's guidance and develops strategies for her review[16].



Problem-setting	• Problem-solving
Conceptual—blank sheet	• Physical and detailed
Questions assumptions and methods	• Procedural
Develops understanding	• Develops products
Paradigm-setting	• Paradigm-accepting
Complements planning, preparation, execution, and assessment	• Patterns and templates active
Commander-driven dialog	• Staff-centered process

🧠 To make sure the Courses of Action (CoAs) are different, it helps to name them. Also, you may want your CoAs to cover these three types before you brief:

Executive – pretty much what you think the Commander is thinking.

Iron Major – What your team thinks is best based on evidence.

Cuckoo's Nest – A third, wildly creative option that may not be possible but helps inspire new ideas.

Objectives

1. Divide your planning group into three or more teams. Each team should take the completed Planning Directive and separately brainstorm a Course of Action using sticky notes:

 - A **Scenario Event** is something outside of your control.
 - An **Executive Decision Point** is a senior official's choice.
 - An **Activity or Strategy** is what the response does.
 - A **Branch** is a fork in the road that needs a different set of Activities.

2. Write each element on a sticky note and paste them to a wall in sequence. This story of what you will do is your Course of Action.
3. Using this method should generate several different Courses of Action (CoAs). Capture them on the **Courses of Action Worksheets**: The First sheet (*Strategies by Incident Phase*) describes the big picture of several different Courses of Action. The Second (*Strategies and Tactics by Group*) goes deeper into a specific Course of Action.
4. The team should rank these Courses of Action. In particular, check that the Means you have described are sufficient to really accomplish each CoA (this can be political) [12] and that each one considers logistical dependencies (e.g. suppliers, distribution means) [6]. Use the **Courses of Action Evaluation Tool** to competitively grade CoAs.
5. Brief your ranked list of multiple CoAs to your Incident Commander. She may choose one, or combine them in some way. Either way, she will define a clear strategy for your plan.

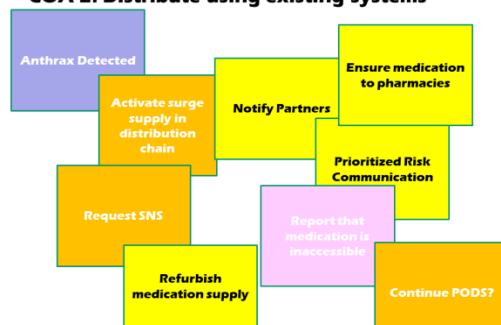
♫ The “What” of Course of Actions

A Course of Action builds out “What We’re Doing” to accomplish the *Commander’s Intent* in the *Planning Directive*. To be complete, a CoA must address all those generic functions which a community needs during a disaster. Research says it must spell out how a jurisdiction evacuates, communicates to the public & between agencies/sectors, cares for medical emergencies, conducts heavy rescue, manages fatalities[13], tracks/distributes lists of patients/survivors/casualties[17], manages an excess of volunteers [39], monitors/prioritizes/sequences tasks, reallocates resources, transmits known info to hospitals, conducts/distributes one unified needs/situation/resource assessment, issues passes to incident sites, handles triage/transport, distributes patients equitably, fulfills logistical needs, manages/tracks excess resources [22], registers mass requests for aid[33] and allocates concrete roles to ad hoc units/volunteers[39].

Timing: Hours, Days, Weeks



**Goal: Prophylax populace in 48 hours
COA 2: Distribute using existing systems**



♫ **Scoring Course of Action**
Courses of Action Evaluation Tool uses these criteria.

Adequacy	Addresses the major problem elements
Feasibility	Realistic for the situation
Acceptability	Complies with Commander’s intent (also, legal)
Completeness	Guides the action to the end state
Distinguishability	Really different than other options
Aligns with research	Integrates Planner’s Checklist and other evidence

All this in every plan? No – use an all-hazards framework BUT it should adjust and grow with each problem you address.