

8: Think in the Thick

The third floor of the fire station on Bush Street [in San Francisco] was the official residence of Chief Dennis Sullivan. When the quake struck, it toppled a set of brick smokestacks, which plummeted through the roof, critically injuring the Chief. He...died 3 days later. He, more than any man in the city, had been aware of the frightful fire potential presented by the miles of crowded wooden buildings.

-In Disaster Response Auf Der Heide [22]

In a crisis, the situation is dynamic, with the body of knowledge growing hour by hour from the latest information sources and intelligence reports. An adequate and feasible...response in a crisis demands flexible procedures keyed to the time available, to communications that are rapid and effective, and to the use of previous planning, whenever possible.

-Joint Field Staff Officer's Guide [62]

Goal

To create a disaster response that thinks critically and flexibly while always putting victims first.

Mission

Crisis situations tend to create shortsighted tunnel vision within emergency responses. Resources need to be sequestered for forward planning in order to maintain a big picture path forward. A unified planning process with senior leaders should be maintained in every operational period. Key operations need to be well-designed even as they're being stood up. Each days' activities need to be evaluated and reconnected to the big picture goals for the emergency. In this way, leaders can **think in the thick** of it and a connect a dynamic situation to the desired end state even as they improvise and leave the pre-planned elements behind.

Operational Approach

- Static plans are inherently inadequate to the changing dynamics of the crisis environment[40]. Truly catastrophic incidents overturn basic explanations of disasters and how to integrate the community[44]. So leaders always have to learn and plan during emergencies and can't rely on fixed protocols.
- To make it through a disaster, original thinking is required[63].
- Planning should not speed up the response, but instead must *slow down* decision making to make sure leaders have the right information in hand [13]. Keep executives away from operations (!) to ensure they focus on clear decisions[22].



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



📖🎵 Your brain on stress first performs better and then degrades as stress increases according to the Yerkes-Dodson Law[7]

🧠 It's tough being a senior official - you don't commit much time to emergency management, but then must lead in crisis. This creates stress, leading to decision hesitation and a fixation on getting a direct response from the jurisdictional Emergency Operations Center (EOC) rather than making decisions. [21].

Objectives

- Leaders consistently forget to plan, which makes outcomes worse [64] and can lead to unethical decision-making[19]. Conduct a **Crisis Action Planning** Cycle for new operations.
 - New operations often duplicate other work. Reach out to your partners before you strategize to make sure the whole city's brain is working on the critical problems – not just yours[46].
 - Ensure consistent leadership and a clear reporting structure to your Operations Section.
 - Define a clear end state, sequester staff, manage data, and develop a unified resource/needs capacity assessment.

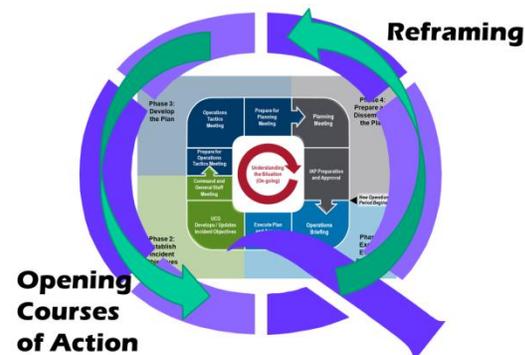
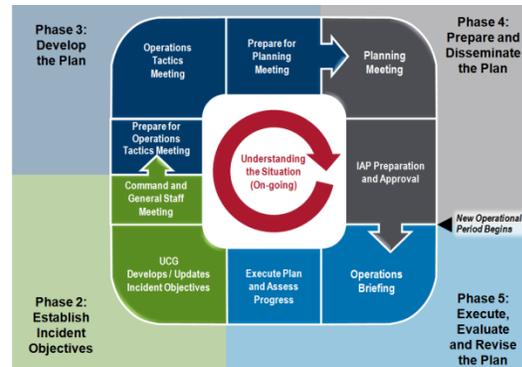
A few minutes planning will save hours of response confusion.
- Institute a clear **Planning P** for each operational period – this is the core cycle of emergency response. It must build an overall, multi-organizational strategy to guide your response or it will fail. The response should be subdivided into functional/geographic groups and organizations given clear assignments [65].
- Consistently rewrite **Job Aids** during the disaster. This ensures that individual learning gets translated into established routines. These Job Aids function as the response system's *memory* and have to be kept up to date [30] or they hurt the response by being wrong [66].

Mind your Planning Ps and Qs

Plans go wrong as soon as they're written. The Planning P drives a response forward, but it's often critiqued for just mapping out the next step[40] – what do we do when we need to turn around[23]? Pair the Planning P with a **Planning Q** – sequester some staff to create a rapid feedback loop that questions assumptions, reframes the mission and opens new Courses of Action during the crisis. Ensure all sectors make joint decisions, remove hierarchies between leaders and priority programs, avoid “big bang” exhaustion by demobilizing burnt out staff [31]. Clarify task ownership for new or overlapping tasks to reduce clashes between leaders[23]. Listen for and incorporate external critique to speed the adoption of important lessons [34]. Use a management metric (like Harrald 2006) to evaluate the response. [52]. Give decentralized leadership proactive support, even if it's outside of set plans[45]. Make sure ICS hierarchies support horizontal coordination (i.e. work from the top down so everything works from the bottom up[9]). Ensure that your response is open and flexible. Visionary leadership will emerge during an emergency response and should be elevated, not shunted aside[14] [21] Find ways to say yes [58]. Just like *Plan Design*, the Planning Q helps you question your assumptions and keep your focus on the real end state.

The **Crisis Action Planning** toolkit is an experience-based guide to plan a response operation during a disaster. *Phase 1 Task List* sets objectives/strategies toward a goal. *Phase 2 Task List* assigns/tracks progress. The *Phase 2 Plan Outline* documents results to make sure everyone is on the same page. Rough but handy.

The **Planning P** (below) has been validated in hundreds of responses. Each operational period, your Incident Commander works establishes objectives for the next operational period. Each group develops strategies/tactics to meet them. Planning Section compiles it all into a plan for the next shift [14].



This **Planning Q** is really just my idea so far. But what a mnemonic! Who's going to forget “Mind your Planning Ps and Qs,” am I right?