

Managing Chaos

The Disaster Planner's Handbook In Eight Parts

Mitch Stripling
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The Problem

Our secret fears are true: We write emergency plans that nobody reads[4].

But it's worse than that.

The presence of plans has **no correlation** to improvement in disaster response. None [10-13].

But it's worse than that.

Done wrong (and most of us do it sort of wrong), disaster planning creates complicated documents full of specific actions that make us *feel* prepared but really just perpetuate a fantasy world. **Poor planning makes disaster response worse** – hierarchical, slow, with a false sense of security and stubborn leaders that won't innovate when we need them most. [1, 22, 23].

But it's worse than that, even.

No researcher has gleaned the insights from the disaster-based social sciences to teach planners learn how to plan. That means there is no validated process for evidence-based planning in the literature. In other words, we should probably give up. [21, 25]

Except that good planning is desperately important.

The Vision (or End State)

Comprehensive, *multi-hazard* planning based on *real needs* that focuses on *response management* will improve coordination, information flow, communication, and authority relations during a disaster every time [26].

We need to plan. But we barely know how.

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The Mission

Managing Chaos distills the best research I could find into a Handbook meant to fill that gap. First, I compiled ten evidence-based criteria into  **The Disaster Planner's Evidence-Based Criteria**.

Based on those criteria, I propose a process that contains eight succinct phases – two pages each in the Handbook. These roughly follow and expand on FEMA's planning guidance[14].

Each phase follows a common planning structure:

- **Strategic Objective (Goal)** – a big picture statement on WHY you're doing what you're doing.
- **Mission Narrative** – a plain language story meant to help you grasp the entire phase.
- **Operational Approach** – some general guidance on the BIG HOW: how to consider the phase based on research.
- **Objectives** – a set of steps describing WHAT you should do the complete that phase.
- **Activities/Tactics** – the LITTLE HOW used to complete an Objective. Throughout, the handbook references Job Aids that give you specific planning activities/tactics to use.

The whole project is summed up by a  **Disaster Planner's Checklist**.

Taken together, these phases are a process for solving the wicked problems we face in disasters. Do you follow them all every time? No - you should build an all-hazards framework which wrestles with most of these. Nevertheless, you have to question that framework with every new problem.

This process doesn't make planning *easier*; it's not some off-the-shelf template. Instead, this a pathway to steep you in the character of the problem you're trying to solve[27].

Finally, this handbook *is* evidence-based, but it's *not* objective. Where ideas conflict, I choose one. Where there's no evidence base, I write from my experience. My **Goal** is to give you, disaster planner, a thread to guide you through *a* (not *the*) process.

I fell into my first declared disaster a decade ago and got lost. That's the thing about planning for disasters. You always get lost. There's no other way. So we'll use this thread and try to find out way out together.

-Mitch

P.S. All plans need to be alive. They only live in ongoing discussion. So send me thoughts/edits to mstripli@health.nyc.gov, okay?

 **The Disaster Planner's Evidence-Based Criteria** is based heavily on the work of Enrico Quarantelli. Each Phase of the document will show which criteria that Phase addresses. Look for this symbol:   

The  **Disaster Planner's Checklist** will trigger your memory of what you learn in the *Handbook*. Maybe put this on your wall? No, really. Put it on your wall.

Legend

[#] Numbered citations are found at the end of the handbook

 Denotes a Job Aid found in the accompanying folders

   Tells you which elements of Quarantelli's evidence-based criteria a phase fulfills

  Research note that delves into some theoretical concerns

 Personal advice from me to you