

Speaker 1: [00:04](#) Welcome to "Prep Talk," the emergency management podcast. Find out what you need to know about preparedness, get all the latest tips from experts in the field and learn what to do before the next disaster strikes from the Emergency Management Department in the city that never sleeps. Here are your hosts, Omar Bourne, and Allison Pennisi.

Omar Bourne: [00:26](#) Hello everyone. Thank you for listening. I'm Omar Bourne.

Allison Pennisi: [00:30](#) And I'm Allison Pennisi. And you are our listeners, and as always, we thank you for joining us. We want you to come back as often as you can, so feel free to listen to "Prep Talk" on your favorite podcast provider. You can also follow us on social media, on our Twitter, @nycemergencymgt, Facebook, Instagram, and much more.

Omar Bourne: [00:48](#) New York City Emergency Management recently started a new speaker series for its staff called "Lessons in Leadership," which highlights the professional journeys of leaders in the emergency management and public safety fields. Today's special guest, Marty Bahamonde, knows firsthand some of the challenges of leading during a crisis.

Allison Pennisi: [01:09](#) That's right, Omar. Mr. Bahamonde is the director of the disaster operations division of FEMA's Office of External Affairs. In his role, he leads a team of nearly 600 people who are trained and deployed to support disaster operations across the country. He has led many external affairs, operations of national significance, including but not limited to response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and Hurricanes Harvey and Maria in 2017.

Omar Bourne: [01:35](#) We are looking forward to hearing from Mr. Bahamonde, but before we dive in, you know what time it is. Let us get you up to date on the latest news in the emergency management field.

Speaker 4: [01:48](#) Here's your "Prep Talk" situation report.

Allison Pennisi: [01:52](#) All right. This is the situation report. Let's get started.

Omar Bourne: [01:55](#) Thank you, Allison. Our first story comes from New York City. The City has deployed a number of personnel to Puerto Rico to help with response efforts following the recent earthquakes. These include building engineers and inspectors, mental health and public health emergency management professionals, and emergency managers. Now, during the deployment, the teams will work closely with local municipalities to conduct structural

assessments, coordinate resources, and provide counseling and psychological aid to help individuals cope with the recent events. Since the end of December, numerous earthquakes and aftershocks have devastated the island, driving thousands of people to outdoor shelters.

- Omar Bourne: [02:40](#) Today, 71 New York City personnel have been deployed to assist with the response efforts.
- Allison Pennisi: [02:46](#) Thanks Omar. Recently, a powerful magnitude 7.7 earthquake struck off the coast of Jamaica. Fortunately, there have been no initial reports of major damage or deaths. Following the earthquake, the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued a tsunami threat for Belize, Cuba, Honduras, Mexico, the Cayman Islands, and Jamaica but later canceled after the danger had passed. The quake was felt as far as Miami, with some buildings even evacuating. And that is the situation report. Still to come, we will be speaking with FEMA's Marty Bahamonde. But first, here is a public service announcement from New York City Emergency Management and the Ad Council.
- Speaker 5: [03:24](#) Your daughter doesn't want to talk about why her room is a horrible mess. Your son doesn't want to talk about why he's wearing mismatching socks. Your spouse doesn't want to talk about their bad haircut. Families don't have to talk about everything, but they should talk to plan for an emergency, pack basic supplies in a Go Bag, water, canned food, flashlights, batteries, medical supplies, IDs, and some cash. Talk about where you'll meet in case you lose one another and of course, don't forget to pack the dog treats. Talk to your family and make an emergency plan. Go to [NYC.gov/readyny](http://NYC.gov/readyny) or call 311 to make your family's emergency plan. Brought to you by New York City Emergency Management and the Ad Council.
- Speaker 4: [04:25](#) You're listening to "Prep Talk," the emergency management podcast.
- Omar Bourne: [04:32](#) You are listening to "Prep Talk" and we are back. Let us welcome our special guest to the show, FEMA's Marty Bahamonde. Thank you for joining us.
- Marty Bahamonde: [04:42](#) Thank you for having me.
- Omar Bourne: [04:44](#) Now, you have an impressive professional career and you started in radio and TV. You actually studied radio and TV in undergrad and then physical therapy in graduate school. So I got to ask, can you share a little about your career path that led

you to FEMA? Talk to us about the radio and the TV and then physical therapy because I'm intrigued.

Marty Bahamonde: [05:09](#) Sure. I grew up always wanting to be a TV sportscaster. That was my dream from the moment I was watching TV. And I achieved it, went to school, got a radio, TV degree, got a job in television, was a TV sportscaster, loved it. Moved to the Island of Guam to continue that TV career, but while I was there for four years, I experienced seven typhoons.

Omar Bourne: [05:33](#) Wow.

Marty Bahamonde: [05:33](#) And this relief agency kept coming out. I mean, because we had some major typhoons, we didn't have power or water for a month, and it was FEMA. And I said, "You know what, that's a pretty noble profession that people would leave their families, come halfway around the world to help me because I'm in need." And I said, "It's a little more powerful than reading sports scores at 10 o'clock at night." And so I was really intrigued with it. So started a career in FEMA, but traveled all the time. I was traveling all the time and my wife and I wanted to settle down and have kids and I knew this lifestyle wasn't going to work.

Marty Bahamonde: [06:07](#) My family was a medical family, my father was a doctor, my mom was a paramedic. So I grew up in a medical family and I was looking for another profession that would also help people. And that's why I got interested in physical therapy. Went off, got a master's degree in physical therapy, started a career in physical therapy and then 9/11 hit.

Omar Bourne: [06:24](#) Right.

Allison Pennisi: [06:25](#) Wow.

Marty Bahamonde: [06:25](#) And when 9/11 hit and FEMA said, "Hey, can you come back?" I knew that's where I needed to go. And so 9/11 changed that career path.

Omar Bourne: [06:32](#) Wow.

Marty Bahamonde: [06:33](#) And I came back to emergency management because of 9/11 and have been with it ever since.

Omar Bourne: [06:38](#) It's powerful.

- Allison Pennisi: [06:40](#) So you have this really impressive career, and we were talking about lessons in leadership and you actually visited New York City Emergency Management to talk about your role in leadership. How would you define leadership for our listeners?
- Marty Bahamonde: [06:52](#) Empowering people to do their job. I really think that's the key to good leadership is to empower people to use their skills, to use their mind, to build confidence that they can do the job and to tap into their moral well-being. In emergency management, I think most people are in emergency management because they have a moral sense of wanting to help people and I think you can tap into that. So the best leaders that I've ever had and the leader that I try to be is to empower my staff to be the best that they can be. I don't give them tasks, I give them the vision of what needs to be done and I want you to create that task in your own vision. And I think that's been very successful for me in the past.
- Omar Bourne: [07:34](#) Now when you look at emergency response, and you mentioned this in your talk earlier with the staff, you talk about information and why that is key to people who may have survived an emergency. Can you talk a little about that for our listeners?
- Marty Bahamonde: [07:54](#) Yeah. In my 27 years, I have certainly met a lot of disaster survivors. And while food is important, water's important, all disaster survivors want to do is be empowered again. Because when you lose everything in a disaster, you lose your sense, you lose the core of who you are, you feel you have no power because everything that you know is now gone. And information is the start to give people empowerment back. I always tell my staff, "You've got to give them information that is action-oriented. Give them something that they can do, give them someplace that they can go and start to build that confidence that they themselves can control their own recovery. And when you do that, they come out on the other end far greater than if you just give people something.
- Marty Bahamonde: [08:50](#) If you just constantly give them food and water, they'll just consume it. You must give people empowerment to take back control of their lives because they've lost that sense of that.
- Omar Bourne: [09:00](#) It's the saying that we always hear about, give someone a fish, they can eat for one day, but teach them how to fish, and they'll be able to eat for a lifetime.
- Marty Bahamonde: [09:10](#) Yes.

Allison Pennisi: [09:10](#) Absolutely.

Omar Bourne: [09:11](#) [crosstalk 00:09:11].

Marty Bahamonde: [09:12](#) Same analogy. Absolutely.

Omar Bourne: [09:14](#) People often say that knowing how to lead is only half the battle, understanding leadership and actually leading are two different activities. So what are the key traits that make someone a successful leader?

Marty Bahamonde: [09:29](#) I personally think the most important trait is listening. When you can listen and take suggestions, take advice, I think that is so important. When you are just one of those leaders that thinks that you know all the answers and you can dictate all that needs to be done, then you're just doing it somebody else's way. But I like to think that... I want to listen to the ideas of people, I want to hear what they have. When they ask me a question, oftentimes I turn that back around and ask them the question, what would you do? How would you handle that? And then you can start to see them start to think about it. And you know what? When they come up with an answer, it builds their confidence.

Marty Bahamonde: [10:09](#) And when you build somebody's confidence, they're more empowered in their job, and they're willing to take risks, they're willing to step out there. They're not afraid to fail. And boy, you've taken an employee who was uncertain on themselves and you've created something that as a leader you just stand behind and you watch it happen and you let it go. Don't get in their way.

Allison Pennisi: [10:32](#) So what would you consider are some of the biggest challenges you have faced as a leader?

Marty Bahamonde: [10:38](#) For me in my position, it's building a cohesive team. In my position, oftentimes, when we come together in disasters, we have strangers that come together as a team, they've never worked together before, you don't know personalities, you don't know strengths. Those are challenging things. I talked about some books that I've read that talk about personalities and how certain personalities work best with other personalities and how you meld those teams. Those are the biggest challenges I have is building a team instantly. Because when we go out, FEMA goes out on disasters, I don't have two weeks, I don't have three weeks for people to get to know each

other, understand their personalities, what their skills are, I need to manage that in day one.

- Marty Bahamonde: [11:24](#) And that's a challenge. So I spend a lot of time studying psychology, reading about how people perform, reading books about people, because you have to understand that aspect when you're going to build a team of people who normally don't work together.
- Omar Bourne: [11:42](#) Right.
- Allison Pennisi: [11:42](#) I think it's important you go into that mindset without any preconceived notions that everyone's going to come to the table with a different personality, different set of actions that they would like take. But ultimately, in emergency management we say this, the common goal is to help one another. So thank you for that.
- Marty Bahamonde: [11:58](#) Yes. I'll do one quick story if I may. I had a gentleman who came into a disaster, asked him to do a task, it was back in the days before social media or electronics, you had to clip newspaper articles, and he did the job. About three weeks later, we had a chance to sit down and talk and I asked him what his background was. He was a former two star general.
- Omar Bourne: [12:21](#) Wow.
- Marty Bahamonde: [12:21](#) He didn't once ask and say, "That's not my responsibility," or "That's beneath me." He knew the job that needed to be done, he clipped the newspaper articles, taped them on a piece of paper, and that's the task that he needed. I felt embarrassed at the time, but that taught me a lot about when you go into those situations, you've got to put all of that behind you. You just got to meet the need.
- Allison Pennisi: [12:42](#) It's funny you mentioned that. I remember I actually started at New York City Emergency Management a few days before Hurricane Sandy made landfall in New York City. And one of the tasks that I had was putting together flyers, especially that because communication was down in a lot of neighborhoods, there were power outages. One of the things that we had done was we had to create documents for people to read and ingest and get the information that they needed. And one of the parts of that was making copies, administrative work that most people might say in a typical day-to-day setting, "That's not my job. I don't need to make copies." In a disaster, everybody makes copies.

Omar Bourne: [13:18](#) Right.

Marty Bahamonde: [13:18](#) Yes, absolutely.

Allison Pennisi: [13:20](#) And it's a humble lesson learned.

Marty Bahamonde: [13:21](#) Yep. You have to put that ego aside and just do what needs to get done.

Allison Pennisi: [13:24](#) Absolutely.

Marty Bahamonde: [13:25](#) And so when a retired two star general... I tell that story every time I'm in a training class. Leave your ego at the door.

Omar Bourne: [13:33](#) I want to switch gears a little to leading during a crisis versus leading on a daily basis. How is your approach to leadership different in each situation?

Marty Bahamonde: [13:45](#) I think when you get into a crisis, you're instantly thrown into chaos and there are two ways that you can go when you're leading. You can either add to the chaos with your hair on fire or you can present calm and focus. And I think my experience over the years is those leaders who are calm and focused under the most intense pressure are the ones that come out the end on the other side in a much better situation because staff is looking at what your demeanor is and if you're chaotic, they're going to be chaotic and not focused. But if you can sit and clearly portray to them a vision of what needs to be accomplished in a very calm manner, it makes them calm and then they're able to focus and do the job.

Marty Bahamonde: [14:28](#) So I think that's the difference between blue sky and gray sky days, when you're in that crisis situation, to develop a calm and a focus. And that's what's been successful for me in the past.

Allison Pennisi: [14:40](#) How can one develop such skills? I mean, we say this, having the calm demeanor is obviously important during blue sky times so you could transfer that to a gray sky time. But how do you actually practice that and develop that skill?

Marty Bahamonde: [14:55](#) Put yourself in uncomfortable positions, challenge yourself to do things. When I came to New York, I'd never ridden the New York City subway. And when I got off the train, I could have either taken the cab and gotten right here or I could have tried to figure out the scariness of riding the New York subway. And so I challenged myself at that moment to ride the New York subway. And you know what? I did it. And when I got off that

subway, I was proud of myself. Internally, I said, "You know what? You did it. Good for you." And so that's an example of I challenged myself in a scary situation to do something and now I'm more empowered.

Marty Bahamonde: [15:31](#)

So when I leave here and I got to go back to Penn Station, I'm hopping on that subway and I know I'm going to get there.

Allison Pennisi: [15:37](#)

Go.

Marty Bahamonde: [15:37](#)

And that's empowering.

Omar Bourne: [15:38](#)

And I think one of the other things is for a leader not to be afraid to ask questions. Right? Because I feel like sometimes as a leader is people may think that, oh, I have to have all the answers. But no, and you've spoken about this in the past as well. You can't be afraid to just loop your team in and let them know that, hey, I need you just as much as you may need me and I'm not afraid to ask you for the questions.

Marty Bahamonde: [16:04](#)

To me, it is not a weakness for a leader to ask for help. I think that's what a leader is, identifying a moment in time where they say, "I need help too." Because why is there the perception that a leader knows everything, knows all the answers and doesn't need any help? I think that's where leaders fail when they don't ask for help and recognize that there may be somebody else that has some information or some ideas that might be a little better than mine and let's use them. But when you do that, give them credit for it because then that empowers them the next time to not to be afraid to speak up.

Allison Pennisi: [16:37](#)

So let's talk about... you're talking about communication, let's talk about communications and leadership. So why is crisis communications critical during a time of disaster?

Marty Bahamonde: [16:49](#)

Because it empowers people to make decisions. I think a lot of times we send out information that isn't action-oriented for people to take action on. There are many times, there's this, it seems to be incessant need to pat ourselves on the back and say, "Here's all the good things that we're doing." And that doesn't help a person who's lost their house, it doesn't really help somebody who doesn't have food or water, but if I can tell them where to go, how to get it, what steps they need to do... Because there isn't a person in this country who's ever had a disaster happen to them and immediately go, "Oh, I know all the steps to recovery. I know exactly what to do"

- Marty Bahamonde: [17:30](#) You don't learn that in school. You don't learn that anywhere. You only learn that when it happens to you. And we live in a society where, that's not going to happen to me. So when it happens, you're really looking for information on how to get out of that situation and what you can do to empower yourselves again. And I think that's what's so critical in crisis communication. And timeliness, I think it's very important when you give people information, you must give them that information at a time when they're able to receive it and are willing to receive it.
- Marty Bahamonde: [18:01](#) One of the things we've said in the past is, and even for Hurricane Sandy, within the first couple of days, somebody wanted to put out information on mold.
- Allison Pennisi: [18:09](#) It's not the time.
- Marty Bahamonde: [18:10](#) I'm like, "It is not the time to talk about mold." We are still in a crisis response situation, but they were steadfast on, "Well, we need to get some information out on mold." I go, "There will be a time when people will want to listen about mold. It is not the time." So if you talk about mold on the third day of the disaster, it's going right over their head. And then when they really need to know about mold, you're going to say, "Ah, I already told them about it." They need it. No, you need to give people information about the things that interest them at that moment in time because that's when they will listen to it. Otherwise, you've lost them as an audience.
- Omar Bourne: [18:44](#) I totally agree with that. One of the other key factors I think is for us as emergency managers, especially when it comes to communicators, is getting out into the field and actually meeting with people. I've responded to Puerto Rico for the earthquakes, North Carolina for Hurricane Florence, and one of the things that I've seen is that when you get out there and you meet with people, you talk to them, you smile with them, you give them a hug, it really helps you to understand what they're going through and then I can come back now and communicate with them better because I can empathize.
- Marty Bahamonde: [19:25](#) Absolutely. I require my staff when we go out on disasters within the first couple of weeks to go out with some team that's going out or just go out by themselves and talk to disaster survivors, see their homes, see the plight that they're in. Because when you come back, then you know why you're there. You know why you're working a 12 hour day and stuff because there's somebody who doesn't have anything. So it's crucial that you maintain or gain that empathy for them. If you just show up

in an office building two hours away from a disaster and you work for two months and you go home, you don't have the same thing.

- Marty Bahamonde: [20:01](#) I also, at the end of the day when we have meetings, I ask my staff to tell me how they impacted a disaster survivor that day so that they throughout their day can stay focused on why I'm here. What's my purpose being at this disaster is to help a disaster survivor. And there are a lot of times they're like, "I'm just copying papers," and stuff like that. Well, your copying papers allows somebody to do their job, which allows somebody else to do their job, who's touching a disaster survivor. So it's that six degrees of separation, you have to find that for everybody so that they feel important in that operation. And I think those things are key. Absolutely.
- Omar Bourne: [20:38](#) Is there a communication success story that you would like to share with our listeners?
- Marty Bahamonde: [20:43](#) Along with what we're just talking about, I was out on a disaster and I was going out, going door-to-door to talk to individuals, let them know how they can apply for assistance. And I came across a family that was deaf, hard of hearing. And they weren't receiving information. They didn't have anybody that was stopping in on them, and immediately recognized that they didn't have anybody that was talking to them. So got an American sign language interpreter, sent him to their house and literally saved their lives because we now understood what they needed and we spoke their language. That is so crucial in disaster survivors when you can engage them with people that they're familiar with and speak their language, it automatically develops a trust factor and they trust you.
- Marty Bahamonde: [21:36](#) So this case, we now had somebody who spoke their language, we understood what their needs were, we got them assistance, we got them food. We found them new housing, literally changed those people's lives because we were able to speak their language. And I'll never forget that. When that whole situation was done, it's the reason why you work in emergency management because you actually knew how you helped somebody.
- Omar Bourne: [21:59](#) Any last words of advice for our listeners who may feel as if they aren't leaders and just may want some encouragement on how they can go about leading?
- Marty Bahamonde: [22:10](#) Don't be afraid of what's in front of you. I spoke to a woman within the last half hour and she says, "I'm kind of shy, not sure,

I'm always scared to do something like that." And I , you know what, when you can push through that fear, when you can push through that uncertainty, on the other side is confidence. And when you get to the other side, it's empowering and you're going to love it. So don't be afraid to put yourself in challenging positions because I promise you, on the other side is a much better way.

Omar Bourne: [22:42](#)

I like that a lot. For me personally, I feel as if sometimes I'm afraid of failure. Right? How do you speak to having people understand that it's okay to fail and it's something that you don't necessarily have to be afraid of?

Marty Bahamonde: [22:57](#)

Oh, there's no such thing as failure. It's called a lesson learned. That's what it is. If you can channel it in a way that whatever you experienced, right or wrong, it was a lesson learned and coming out of that, if you're better for it, then it wasn't a failure because you learned something. Don't focus on failure. Don't be afraid to fail. It's part of life. Embrace it. Learn from it, and move on from it in a lesson learned. So I always tell my staff, "Hey, you can fail 10 times, but that one time you come up with an idea that is life changing, wow, look at what a difference you made."

Allison Pennisi: [23:31](#)

Re-branding failure. I think that that's something we need to teach to everyone. So our Prep Talk listeners, re-brand failure. Don't be afraid and do something that scares you.

Marty Bahamonde: [23:42](#)

It's a lesson learned.

Allison Pennisi: [23:43](#)

There you go. So it is rapid response time. And if you are a first time listener, it's simple. Omar and I will ask questions and our guest will give the first answer that comes to mind.

Speaker 4: [23:54](#)

If you don't know, now you know. You're listening to "Prep Talk," the emergency management podcast. It's time for "Prep Talk" Rapid Response.

Allison Pennisi: [24:10](#)

Okay. Marty, what is the one emergency item you cannot live without?

Marty Bahamonde: [24:14](#)

Flashlight.

Omar Bourne: [24:16](#)

A lot of people say that here. It makes sense.

Allison Pennisi: [24:18](#)

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Marty Bahamonde: [24:19](#) Power. We all want power.

Omar Bourne: [24:20](#) There you go.

Allison Pennisi: [24:23](#) Lessons in leadership, we want power.

Omar Bourne: [24:24](#) Figuratively and maybe literally as well. What is your favorite TV show?

Marty Bahamonde: [24:31](#) Any documentary on Netflix. I love documentaries.

Omar Bourne: [24:35](#) What's the last one you've seen? I'm putting you on the spot I guess.

Marty Bahamonde: [24:39](#) The last documentary?

Omar Bourne: [24:40](#) Yeah.

Marty Bahamonde: [24:40](#) American Factory. It's about the closing of factories in the United States and how communities are impacted by that.

Omar Bourne: [24:48](#) Oh, wow.

Allison Pennisi: [24:48](#) Wow.

Omar Bourne: [24:49](#) All right, so we have something to add to our lists of Netflix shows for this weekend, Allison, sometime.

Allison Pennisi: [24:56](#) I have like a laundry list of Netflix shows I still have to catch up on. We're a little busy. I'm sure you have a list, but name one leader you admire.

Marty Bahamonde: [25:06](#) Deanne Criswell.

Omar Bourne: [25:07](#) Oh.

Allison Pennisi: [25:08](#) There we go.

Omar Bourne: [25:08](#) For our listeners, that is our commissioner here at New York City Emergency Management.

Marty Bahamonde: [25:12](#) I learned a lot from her. I really did.

Omar Bourne: [25:14](#) So what is the best leadership advice that Commissioner Criswell may have told you?

Marty Bahamonde: [25:21](#) Don't be afraid to fail. Go out there and be the best that you can be and don't worry what happens because if you're doing the right thing, it'll all work out.

Allison Pennisi: [25:29](#) Sum up the work you do in one word.

Marty Bahamonde: [25:31](#) Meaningful.

Allison Pennisi: [25:32](#) I like that very much.

Omar Bourne: [25:33](#) I didn't mention this, I didn't ask this question earlier, but you have an accent, so I have to ask it now. Where were you from, Marty?

Marty Bahamonde: [25:40](#) I was born in a town of 250 in North Dakota and grew up in Illinois. I am the definition of not a city kid, lived in small towns my whole life, but really was brought up in a family that focused on service. Again, both of my parents were in the medical profession and I saw them serve people every day of their life and that stayed with me. And once I got through my fantasy of being a TV sportscaster, the core of who I really was and how I grew up settled in with me. And that's why I've been working in emergency management for the past 28 years.

Omar Bourne: [26:22](#) And as a leader, I think that's just the key to leadership, service. Service and empowerment.

Marty Bahamonde: [26:29](#) Absolutely. The hours are long, the dedication is long. I don't ask for any ribbons, but the amount of birthdays that I've missed of my kids growing up, school events, because I've been out helping other people, I missed a lot of my family growing up because I was out helping other people. But now my kids, they want to help people. It's instilled in them that service is a good thing. And so I think in some ways, I've helped to shape my kids in doing that, but understanding that there's a lot of sacrifice in this profession, but that's just what we do and I think that's why we do it.

Allison Pennisi: [27:11](#) Goes back to a lesson that we talk about on "Prep Talk" all the time. Emergency management is a shared field. It is a shared responsibility for us to work together and help others. So we thank you very much for being with us. All right. Marty Bahamonde, thank you very much for joining "Prep Talk." And for our listeners, you can become a leader in emergency management, all it takes is a little confidence and don't be afraid to fail.

Speaker 1:

[27:39](#)

That's this episode of "Prep Talk." If you like what you heard, you can listen any time online or through your favorite RSS feed. Until next time, stay safe and prepared.