

After disaster, myths hamper

9/11 offers case study of how people, government agencies react to tragedy.

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Writer William Langewiesche was given complete access to the recovery and removal effort at the World Trade Center immediately after the terrorist attack. He had round-the-clock access to the site and to supervisors and workers. The first of his three-part report appeared in the July-August issue of the Atlantic Monthly. The articles will be published later this year as a book.

As an instructor in crisis intervention in the criminal justice program at Columbia College, I found his insightful report almost a textbook example of what really happens in a major disaster. That is, there are many myths of how people react and of how the various tasks of recovery are handled; the reality is often quite different. Because we are faced with the possibility of more attacks, I thought it would be helpful to take a look at the myths and at the reality and see what conclusions we can draw.

Myth: People panic in the face of a disaster

"After the dust storms settled, people on the streets of Lower Manhattan were calm," Langewiesche reports. "They walked instead of running, talked without shouting, and tried to regain their sense of place and time." Even in the stairwells below the point where the planes hit, calm prevailed and people going down stayed in an orderly line, leaving room for firefighters working their way into the building.

People panic only when there is an immediate threat to their lives and escape routes are blocked. We can predict there was panic above the area where the stairwells were blocked. This is demonstrated by the number of people who jumped out of windows, in some cases headfirst.

Rather than panic when the crisis hits, there is often a period of confusion and sometimes denial as victims attempt to decide what has happened to them. People make their best guesses, which can prevent them from taking appropriate action. In the case of the World Trade Center attacks, the most frequent guess was that another bomb like the one in 1993 had been set off. The scope of the attack was so massive that few considered they had been hit by a fuel-loaded airplane that would set off a fire that would melt the steel beams.

I noticed similar reactions in India when I was there after the earthquake in 2001 that killed as many as 100,000 people. Several informants I talked to at first thought a bomb had gone off; it was only three hours later that everyone knew they were victims of an earthquake.

Conclusion: During a crisis, people will take what they perceive to be appropriate actions even without direction or leadership. They are not likely to panic.

Myth: There will likely be a shortage of resources during and after a crisis

Almost immediately after the 9/11 attacks, supplies began to pour into the site: drinks, blankets, gloves and food. So much was offered that the oversupply of goods hampered the rescue effort. Finally trucks had to be assigned to haul the excess away.

Even in the Indian earthquake, neighbors shared what little they had with each other, although it fell far short of what was needed. In our local disaster, the tornado of 1999, I was impressed with the amount of goods made available to be distributed. A factor I had not expected was the number of people who refused any aid, expressing the desire to take care of their own needs.

At the World Trade Center, the resources most needed were heavy equipment and masks against toxicity. These took longer to locate and get to the disaster area, but they were available.

In some foreign countries I have visited, even if equipment is available its use is likely to be controlled by officials who have their hands out for a payoff. It is depressing to see how corruption prevents rescue and recovery in those countries. Langewiesche reports in his article that corruption did not enter the picture in the 9/11 disaster until late in the recovery operation.

The fact is that in the United States the supply of resources after a disaster has seldom been a problem. Usually more goods are available than can be used. This is true even if no new supplies enter the disaster area for some days.

Conclusion: There should be some way for outsiders to find out what kind of contributions and supplies are needed to prevent clogging the system.

Myth: There will be a shortage of personnel during a disaster

For the first few days at the World Trade Center site, there were too many volunteers to be absorbed in the rescue and recovery operation. Until some organization was made in their attack on the massive mountain of steel and cement, little progress was made. The initial bucket brigades were ineffective. In studying other disasters, I found what happens is that without organization each rescue group tends to go over the same territory that another group has covered, in some cases actually putting debris back from where it had just been moved.

Since post-traumatic-stress reactions have become so highly publicized, mental health workers flood into disaster areas to provide counseling. Some are well prepared and others are not, but the desire to help on the scene is quite strong.

The fact is that the site of a disaster is often flooded with many kinds of volunteers offering their services, and the problem becomes one of finding useful tasks for them.

Conclusion: It might be necessary to have a special team at the site to deal with the numbers of people who want to be involved in the rescue and search efforts. As at the World Trade Center, it might be necessary to turn volunteers away.

Myth: Each agency needs to have a good disaster plan and stick to it

The "stick to it" is what makes this a myth. It seems that having a good disaster plan and rehearsing its implementation is desirable. Prepared people will respond more effectively to a variety of crisis situations.

On the other hand, what the WTC attacks demonstrated was that so much that happens is unexpected and that trying to follow the instructions in a 1,500-page plan gets in the way of innovative responses. Although there must be structure and organization, there must also be freedom to innovate.

Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani has been praised for his response to the crisis, part of which was to scrap the organization charts and to work around the city Office of Emergency Management.

As Langewiesche points out, "The problems that had to be solved were largely unprecedented. Action and invention were required on every level, often with no need or possibility of asking permission. As a result, within the vital new culture that grew up at the Trade Center site even the lowliest laborers and firemen were given power."

The early stages of the disaster turned out to be a testing ground out of which arose those individuals who showed they were the most effective in getting the job done. People who previously had little rank found the strength and skill to get work done. They were given leadership roles. This happened at the highest levels. For example, as a result of their performance, two top officials of an obscure agency, the Department of Design and Construction, were given the overall lead in running the recovery effort.

This realigning of leadership roles in the midst of a crisis is a peculiarly American response. In many other countries, we see quite a different response: 1. People in a disaster area wait for orders or instructions from those in command before acting. 2. Leaders responsible for decisions often sit around talking as if words were going to have an effect upon the crisis. 3. The leaders who do end up giving orders often lack vital information about the immediate situation.

Preplanning is good, and plans for disaster response should be in place. But when a major crisis hits, innovation is called for and plans might need to be scrapped.

Conclusion: In a major crisis, it might be best for leadership to stay loose for a few days and as problems are solved pay attention to how and where things are getting done. Look for the leaders in those places.

Myth: Agencies will cooperate to accomplish the task at hand

A power struggle developed at the WTC between the fire department, the police department and the engineers. Langewiesche says, "The firemen in particular felt that they had a special relationship with the site, not only because they had lost 343 people there - out of a force of 14,000 - but also because afterward their survivors, along with their dead, had been idolized as national heroes."

Each of the groups seemed to feel this disaster was more theirs. When I met with people from the Oklahoma City bombing, I was surprised to learn that there was friction between those victims who had survived the bombing and the relatives of victims who had been killed. Both groups felt their loss was special and gave them some priority in making decisions about the memorial to be built on the site.

The fact is that poor coordination among agencies or agency competition often results in misunderstandings, delays in getting tasks accomplished and duplication of effort.

Conclusion: Several things need to be done to ensure full cooperation between agencies. First, disaster planning needs to be inter-organizational with members of the agencies having an opportunity to work with each other before a disaster. Second, because that is not always possible, there needs to be a mediator on hand in the area where decisions are being made to monitor how people are working together. This person might have to engage in on-the-spot mental health interventions when anger or strife interferes with performance.

Myth: Technology has eliminated communication problems

At the WTC, phones did not work, e-mail services had been destroyed and writing memos was out of the question. Langewiesche reports that "When problems arose, they were dealt with right away, either in the room or, if more information was needed, with a walk down the street to the pile, and a decision on the spot."

The fact is that in most disasters, communication problems develop. They are not always caused by technical failures but might involve differences in terms and procedures for getting things done. Each group might assume the others do things the same way and work at cross-purposes.

Conclusion: Organizations that work closely together before a crisis have fewer problems of communication during a crisis. For those that do not usually work together, there might need to be someone available who understands the cultural differences between agencies.

We have learned from each disaster, but we have not always paid attention to what knowledge exists about response to crisis. Having suffered a major attack, planners will now have to pay more attention to what is myth and what is fact.

