

Guidelines to support staff in disaster preparedness

Practical guidance for leadership and cohesion in directing health care providers and public safety personnel

Effective leadership and cohesion are crucial in disaster preparedness for many reasons. Leadership provides direction, clarity, and decision making during chaotic and unpredictable situations.

Strong leaders inspire confidence, foster resilience, and mobilize resources. They guide teams and communities through adversity with clear vision and strategy.

Cohesion among health care workers, first responders, and other stakeholders improves communication, co-operation, and the sharing of resources — all of which are essential to efficient disaster responses.

When leadership and cohesion come together, they form the backbone of preparedness efforts.

Take control and manage the situation. Reconstitute the leadership of a group where appropriate and feasible

Leadership

Leadership is critical in fostering collaboration, setting goals, making decisions, and maintaining accountability:

- Establish policies and structures for coordinating emergency management at federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal levels ahead of time.

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- Regularly check disaster preparedness plans to be up to date and accurate — and adapt them when they are not.

Networked/collaborative approach

Advocate for a networked approach in which multiple organizations work together in a coordinated manner, pooling their resources and expertise:

- Promote community involvement in preparedness and response efforts, including outreach, education, and partnership building.

Emergency task force model

Define the roles and responsibilities of groups and individuals before, during, and after a crisis. It is important for everyone to know their role to coordinate resources:

- Establish shared goals and leverage resources efficiently.
- Reinforce the importance of an organized, flexible, and adaptive approach to emergency management.

Additional resources

- Waugh, W. L., & Streib, G. (2006). Collaboration and Leadership for Effective Emergency Management. *Public Administration Review*, 66(s1), 131–140.
doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2006.00673.x
- Public Safety Canada. (2017). *An Emergent Management Framework for Canada, Third Edition*.
publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/2017-mrgnc-mngmnt-frmwrk/2017-mrgnc-mngmnt-frmwrk-en.pdf

Make someone available to answer questions. Provide verbal reassurance and support — even when there’s no new information to share

- Define the roles of various stakeholders in emergency communication. Public officials, responders, and the media must coordinate and collaborate.
- Effective and consistent communication is key in managing public perceptions and maintaining trust and transparency:
 - The combination of a crisis, heightened emotions, limited access to facts, and rumours/gossip/speculation can quickly lead to an unstable information environment.
 - To limit this, consider the effectiveness of different communication channels, including traditional media, social media, and direct messaging.
 - These channels can be used to disseminate timely information, correct misinformation, and engage with the public.
- Recognize that there is a need for cultural sensitivity and language accessibility in communication efforts:
 - Vulnerable populations might require additional reassurance to address their needs.
 - When communicating complex technical terms, avoid the use of jargon and acronyms. Provide definitions, use consistent names and terms of reference, and consider what (if any) visuals can be used.
- Provide verbal reassurances such as “We are working on that,” “There are people working on finding that out,” and “We will let you know as soon as we learn more.”
 - Avoid phrases like “No comment” during a crisis. These words convey a sense of secrecy and imply you know something that you are unwilling or disallowed to share with the public. This creates skepticism and mistrust.
 - If information is unknown or unavailable, the best thing to do is to honestly admit it. Saying “I don’t know that now” and explaining what is unknown and how you intend to find it out is a valid approach.

- Provide strategies for self-care and maintaining resilience during prolonged crisis situations:
 - See positive coping mechanisms for more information.
 - Emphasize the importance of seeking support and managing stress effectively.
 - Protect mental health. Excessive media exposure to trauma-inducing information and images is a risk factor for developing PTSD and depression. Be mindful of what content is being shared.

Additional resources

- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). (2014). *Lesson 3: Communicating in an Emergency*.
training.fema.gov/emiweb/is/is242b/student%20manual/sm_03.pdf
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2019). *Communicating in a Crisis: Risk Communication Guidelines for Public Officials*.
store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep19-01-01-005.pdf

Team cohesion

Key aspect	Description
Effective communication	A cohesive team understands its members' communication styles, ensuring information flows smoothly. This is critical for making quick decisions and implementing urgent actions.
Coordination of resources	A cohesive team can effectively coordinate resources, ensuring they are sent where they are most needed without duplication or waste. This efficiency is vital in managing mass casualties and minimizing the impact of a crisis.

Key aspect	Description
Adaptability and flexibility	A cohesive team is more adaptable and flexible, able to adjust its strategies and tactics quickly in response to changing circumstances. This agility is crucial for staying ahead of the crisis curve and optimizing response efforts.
Support and resilience	A cohesive team provides mutual support, morale boosting, and resilience. This network of care helps team members cope with stress and maintain focus on their tasks.
Shared goals and responsibilities	A cohesive team shares common goals and understands individual responsibilities within the larger framework of the response effort. This clarity minimizes confusion and ensures that all aspects of the response are covered.
Learning and improvement	After a crisis, a cohesive team is better positioned to conduct debriefings and evaluations. This practice enhances organizational learning and prepares the team for future crises.

Additional resources

- Pan-American Health Organization. (2019). *Mass Casualty Management System Course Manual*. iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/51484

Maintain the well-being of leaders

Rescuers may experience traumatic events— either at the scene of a crisis or later — that have the potential to interfere with their ability to function.

It is important to address the emotional and psychological impact of crises on health care providers, public safety personnel, military personnel, and other individuals taking on leadership or rescuer roles.

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- Provide strategies for self-care and maintaining resilience during prolonged crisis situations. See positive coping mechanisms for more information (<https://canemerg-urgencecan.com/managing-reactions-to-stress/>).
 - Emphasize the importance of seeking support and managing stress effectively. See the navigation tool for more information.

Additional resources

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2019). *Communicating in a Crisis: Risk Communication Guidelines for Public Officials*. store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep19-01-01-005.pdf