

## **Management Is All About Relationships**

It seems all I hear from Emergency Management Coordinators today is that no one cares, no one will help and no one wants to cooperate. Although there certainly is some truth to this common complaint, I believe we sometimes forget what management is all about. The most important word in that title is manager and management is about relationships.

As an instructor of management practices I have had the opportunity to meet and learn from the thousands of students I have had in my classes. If there is one common thread that I see in truly effective managers it would be those people who take the time to build and maintain good relationships.

We forget that Emergency Management is not just about dealing with the crisis. It is what you do all year that makes the difference in how that crisis will play out. It is people, working together as a team, that handle an emergency. Think about all the people who show up at the scene of an emergency. How often do you find yourself interacting with people who you really do not know? What have you done to build and maintain relationships with these people all year long? A crisis is the wrong time to get to know someone.

In his book, "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People", Stephen Covey talks about relationships as emotional bank accounts. How can we expect to make withdraws if we have never made a deposit.

Building and maintaining relationships has everything to do with your interpersonal skills. These are your people skills. How well do you deal with others? Be honest with yourself. A willingness to change is the key to making progress in any area. Remember, the definition of insanity is knowing what you are doing is not working but continuing to do the same things the same way and expect things to get better.

Here are a few steps you might want to take to start building better relationships with all those people you depend on to be a part of emergency management.

- 1.** Be enthusiastic every day. We all want to be around enthusiastic people who like what they are doing. Enthusiasm is contagious. You have the ability to change your mood at any moment. Do not let outside events control you. Remember, if you are always grumpy or moody, people will not feel comfortable approaching you. Be upbeat and smile at people. No one wants to get on board a ship where the Captain already has his life vest on and is telling everyone the ship is about to sink.

- 2.** Learn to listen to other people. Communication skills are the key to success for managers. The most important part of the communication process is listening. Listening to others is a sure way to let them know you value them as a person

and it is a great way to add to that emotional bank account. Remember to listen with your eyes as well as your ears. Really give the other person your full attention. Listen for the meaning of their words as well as the feelings they are trying to share. By looking at the person, you pick up on all the body language that is the real part of communication. Remember, over 55 % of communication is non-verbal.

**3.** Recognize people and their efforts. When people are asked what it takes to motivate them, the two things that always seem to come out on top are that they want to be recognized for the work they do and they want to have their voices heard. Having their voices heard means they want to have some say in decisions that affect them. So often we ask people to join emergency management teams and then never speak to them again. We write plans dictating what these people have to do and never ask them what they think. It seems we only reach out to them every four years when our plans come due. Take the time to call these people. Invite them to regular meetings. Praise their efforts and thank them for giving of themselves and their time. Remember, many of these people are volunteers. You need them more than they need you.

**4.** Lastly, what is your crisis management style like? Do you work well under stress? Again, you may be a very technically proficient person and easy to get along with on a day-to-day basis but when a crisis strikes, look out. Do you find yourself yelling at people and losing your cool? Again, if you have not taken the time to build a relationship with these people, your low tolerance for stress may now have just nixed any chance of starting a good relationship in the near future. Much of the stress we feel in crisis situations is a result of poor planning and the added stress of working with people who we have not built relationships with in the past. There seems to be no end to large egos in emergency services so a crisis is no time for these egos to meet for the first time. I am not saying that we do not need strong confident leaders in a crisis. It is just that people often mistake quick decisions and barking out orders as the model for a good emergency manager. This is just not true. No one person can effectively handle a large-scale emergency. Nor can any one person effectively manage a large-scale emergency. It takes more than even a large group of people. It takes people working together as a team. It takes a competent individual who is committed to building relationships over time that makes that team possible in the first place.

So the next time you find yourself asking why no one wants to get involved, ask yourself what kind of a manager you are because management is all about relationships.