

# Adaptation: The Evolution of Emergency Management

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The author will be speaking as part of the IAEM 70<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on Nov. 15 at 8:00 a.m.

As an impressionable high schooler and someone who had his eye on becoming a legacy United States Marine from an early age, I was enamored by the film *Heartbreak Ridge* which was released in 1986 and starred Clint Eastwood. As Gunnery Sergeant Highway, Eastwood taught his Reconnaissance platoon that Marines improvise, adapt, and overcome. Once I became a Marine, I discovered that Marines do in fact live by this mantra. These are just a few of the values beaten into Marines. They are values that make them successful on the battlefield, and I believe they are values that have served me well in my emergency management career.

About ten years later, while studying the teachings of United States Air Force Colonel John Boyd, I learned that not only is he the mastermind behind the decision-making process termed the OODA (eww-dah) loop, but that he also had many theories on learning, energy, warfare, and leadership (Coram, 2004). One of them was on developing an ability to unlearn. He believed being tied to obsolete concepts inhibited a person from their real potential and inhibited technological development (Coram, 2004). You must be able to discard and forget that which has become outdated and useless. Boyd also believed in the power of synthesis (Coram, 2004). If you called him a military analyst, he was insulted because that meant you were calling him a half-wit (Coram, 2004). He would say that analysis, or breaking things down into their individual parts, was only good if you were able to synthesize them after your analysis (Coram, 2004). Synthesis means to couple things together for

a superior product (Coram, 2004). Good emergency managers do this. They can identify, in a collaborative process, how partner organizations may have individual assets that can be synthesized with other partner assets for a superior disaster-related product. Unlearning, analysis, and synthesis need to be in the emergency manager toolbox.

Two decades later, as a doctoral student of organizational change and leadership, another lesson was impressed upon me. That lesson was about creativity and innovation. To be good at these concepts, you must question everything (Dyer et al., 2019). You must ask yourself (or your bosses and others in positions of authority, some of whom may not like these questions), “Why is this that way?” Ask why, and whatever the answer is, ask why about that, and then why about that. Keep asking until you get to the root of the reason (Dyer et al., 2019). This will help you ascertain why things are as they are and then you can begin to imagine how things can be.

Over 35 years of learning, I have put these cognitive tools together to make a radical multi-dimensional proposal for the emergency management discipline. This discipline that seeks to mitigate, prepare for, and respond to disasters for the benefit of the whole of the community. This discipline, aside from the arguable changes made with the advent of homeland security, has doctrinally been unchanged since its genesis. The phases of emergency management have gone untouched and unquestioned as if they were written on tablets and handed down to us from Noah himself. Why are these the phases? Are they still applicable? Can

there be other phases? Can there be change?

In November in Savannah, Georgia, I will propose to you at the IAEM Annual Conference that one phase has come to its end within our doctrine. Recovery is outdated. It had a good run. It has served us well. It is a part of our heritage. But, it is done. Its time has passed. Continuing to utilize recovery should be reserved for those that are still using fax machines, dot matrix printers, and the telegraph. Recovery gaslights your brain with a cognitive bias to go back. It sends a signal that implies returning to normal is the goal.

Psychology tells us that to heal from trauma, we must accept that it occurred. Recovery inhibits us from accepting the trauma that has occurred, making meaning of it, and learning from it because it seeks to return to pre-disaster status. The first objective of managing trauma should be to improve your quality of life (Rothschild, 2010). It shouldn't be to return to your previous quality of life. Our communities are no different. They must accept, understand, and learn from the event, and then adapt to it to be transformed into a flourishing and thriving community.

Adaptation refers to a process, action, or systemic result within a particular community or cohort that allows a system to better cope with an altered state, stressor, hazard, risk, or opportunity (Smit and Wandel, 2006). When we replace recovery with adaptation, it allows us to un-learn returning to normalcy. Adaptation allows us to acknowledge a change and accept that there will be more change, more hazards and

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risks, and opportunities to flourish and thrive amid the trauma.

Many emergency managers would be correct to point out that the emergency management definition of recovery includes wording that allows for improvement (National Governor's Association, 1979). However, the mindset cannot be to return to normal or better. The mindset of the new generation of emergency managers needs to be to respond to a disaster and then adapt so that our community thrives, and never has to incur this trauma again. The old definition and the word "recovery" makes returning to a previous state the standard and improvement a secondary option. Removing the word recovery and making adaptation the new phase of emergency management means that returning to the previous state is not an option and the only acceptable standard is change. The result of the change is not only an improvement based on the past disaster but an improvement based on the disaster that is yet to come.

In Savannah, you will hear me talk about adaptation, adaptable intelligence, adaptability, and embracing change with the change. The world is changing and when we return to previous states, we miss the goal of emergency management. We must change with the change. That is adaptation.

Accepting the proposal of replacing recovery with adaptation is not, however, the end point. It is the kick-off to a new era of emergency management that includes adaptation not only in our emergency management phases, but in the approach to our discipline, and as a personal leadership trait among emergency managers. We will seek to adapt the discipline of emergency management. We will question what we are doing and why, and we will adapt it

to the changing world. We will apply adaptation in our office environment and with our elected officials and they will see us as the change agents of the community. We will unlearn the dogmatic traditions of our communities' past. We will analyze and then synthesize and create a vision of what the community should be, and because we are the great collaborators who were willing and able to say why we are changing, we will be able to elevate emergency management to its rightful place within the community, within the government, and within our private and nonprofit sector businesses. That will be the real and lasting change needed for emergency management. It starts with our willingness and ability to change just one word in the phases of emergency management.

It is time to change the way we do things now, and in the future, and for that, we need to change our mindset. We must have adaptable intelligence, and we must apply adaptation in our cyclic phases of the emergency management process. Adaptation allows us to transform. It allows us to flourish, and it makes us more resilient. See me propose this concept in detail on Nov. 15 at 8:00 a.m. in Savannah, Georgia.

[Connect with Randal via email here.](#) ◆

## Citations

Coram, R. (2004). *Boyd: The Fighter Pilot who changed the art of war*. Back Bay Books/Little, Brown.

Dyer, J., Gregersen, H. B., & Christensen, C. M. (2019). *The innovator's DNA: Mastering the five skills of Disruptive Innovators*. Harvard Business Review Press.

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Rothschild, B. (2010). *8 Keys to safe trauma recovery: Take-charge strategies to empower your healing*. W.W. Norton & Co.

Smit, B., & Wandel, J. (2006). *Adaptation, Adaptive Capacity and Vulnerability*. *Global Environmental Exchange*, 6(3), 282-292.

## Mental Health Wellness

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Tennessee Federation of Fire Chaplains. This tiered system can mitigate and prevent the trauma our emergency personnel experience during a disaster, outbreak, or pandemic.

I want to highlight some important resources that can help those who may be researching ways to support your journey with mental illness. Please check out OC87 Recovery Diaries' "[Stories of mental health, empowerment, and change.](#)" According to OC86 Recovery Diaries, "OC87 Recovery Diaries exists to tell stories about how people with mental health challenges have created paths to meaningful lives. We feature stories that inspire and empower, stories that generate discussion and awareness. OC87 Recovery Diaries presents a range of experiences—personal perspectives, recovery innovations, examples of empowerment, strengths, and gaps in the mental health system, and efforts to dismantle stigma—all told by people moving through their recovery journeys."

Secondly, FireFighter Sam McClain is passionate about helping those with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He just established a YouTube channel, Engine 7 Media, to capture stories of those who live with Post Traumatic Stress. You can view Engine 7 Media's videos [here](#).

Moving forward, the Tennessee Department of Health is working to implement Mental Health First Aid Training for all employees and community partners, increase awareness of existing resources and continue to provide a "safe" place for employees to debrief and communicate through the resources offered by the State-wide Disaster Mental Health/Crisis Response Strike Team. The goals are to improve mental health awareness, erase the stigma and provide proven strategies for mitigation, response, and recovery. We look forward to seeing everyone in Savannah this November! ◆