

## **Fly by the Seat of Your Pants? Why Not?**

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Emergency, crisis, incident, disaster, oops, and assorted other named events occur every minute of every day. Fortunately they do not happen to each of us every day, every week, every month or even every year. For example, how many times in the past year have you filed a home owner's insurance claim because of a fire in your home? Yet we use a combination of our own "best practices" (turning off the stove, not piling up trash, not smoking in bed) and governmental compliances (building permits, electrical inspections, smoke detectors, etc) to minimize the potential for the fire. But if a fire were to occur at 3:00 a.m. in your home how many of you would be responding to that fire by the "seat of your pajamas"? How many of us have actually taken the time to practice such a response to include finding a phone to dial 9-1-1; leaving the house; accounting for all the residents and pets; and providing specific information to the responding fire department?

Yet most of us believe we could do all of the required steps in such an emergency because we have a presumed experience base. We know how to dial 9-1-1; we do know the exits from our house; we do know who is in the house (at least most of the time); and we have some idea of what we will need to tell the responding fire department. We have gathered this information by having lived in the house, being exposed to evacuation drills at work or school, having seen movies, and our own sense of self confidence.

So we what have is a balancing act in progress. We aren't experiencing the response to the fire as if we had never seen one before but we are performing functions that we probably have never done under this circumstance. We have made a conscious decision not to increase our level of experience through training and drills because we believe the law of averages is on our side and we have some tangential experience which we believe will be sufficient to overcome the situation.

One of the most often-heard statements about why not to create and maintain an emergency management program is that "we have handled emergencies in the past, and we can handle the next one." And while most of us would like to think that past experience will be a guarantee of success in the future, that just isn't the case.

Combine that attitude with the one that says, "A major emergency will never hit us. The law of averages in on my side and I will just take my chances." This may seem like the ostrich sticking his head in the sand, but if you look at the insurance actuarial tables you can find a lot of comfort in that opinion and approach for preparing for an emergency.

And lastly we have the attitude and belief that the individual and/or the organization is so good that it can just fly by the seat of its pants in responding to an emergency. They will make the correct decisions, they will quickly resolve the emergency, be done with clean-up and recovery in record time and within a month no one will ever know that they experienced an emergency.

And like most urban myths there is some validation in that approach. We have lots of examples of organizations that have successfully weathered the storm of an emergency and resumed normal operations quickly. But we have more examples of organizations who did not weather the storm because they failed to prepare.

Every notice how some things seem so easy for someone else to perform? You struggle to figure out the instructions for assembling a new piece of furniture and the next door neighbor can build a bridge without one engineering drawing. Or some people/companies seem to be able to handle any emergency as if it were no big thing. Some of this may be due to “natural” talent but in most instances it is because they have worked hard in developing the necessary skills. They have practiced their response.

The preparedness element of a successful emergency management program is the one that is the hardest to maintain, has the least amount of glamour and is one of the first areas to be reduced when a company is looking to save money. In a tight economy the traditional knee jerk reaction of many firms is to cut training and research money. Every hour is to be spent creating revenue, not spending revenue.

And therein lies another emergency. A short-sighted approach is eventually going to cost the company additional revenue and maybe even its own existence. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to create a scenario where for the want of properly training employees they cause an emergency, the response is less than adequate, more damage is done to the facility, the company's reputation is significantly diminished, lawsuits are filed by both victims and regulatory agencies, customers are nervous about the company's ability to continue to produce and they turn to another company, the stock price drops, the company files for bankruptcy protection and then the company goes out of business.

To assist in our understanding of what can go wrong let's use the following definition of an emergency: “An emergency is any unplanned event that can cause deaths or significant injuries to employees, customers or the public; or that can shut down your business, disrupt operations, cause physical or environmental damage, or threaten the facility's financial standing or public image.”

I believe there is a naturally occurring component that lets some organization appear to handle the emergency as if they are “flying by the seat of their pants” and to be very successful in that response. It is the component of **Flexibility**. Not a complicated formula or cute marketing term but a built in human compulsion to have a direct influence on how the response and recovery to the emergency will take place. Call it the “sticky finger” approach. Have to get directly involved in the response. But the real advantage of this approach is if it is tied in with a successful preparedness program, the flexibility permits the adaptation of the response to the unique circumstances of the emergency. If the actions being taken are the ones coming immediately to mind at the time without the benefit of preparedness involvement, the response is not going to be eminently successful.

Flexibility recognizes that there must be a balance between having systems, personnel, equipment and facilities in place and being able to adjust on the fly to the unique aspects of the individual emergency. We spend a fair amount of time and creative thought in trying to determine what are the emergencies that could impact our business and what are the odds that each of those emergencies may happen. And yet when one does happen, what are the astronomical odds that it will unfold exactly as we thought it would? There is always a set of circumstances that makes this emergency different from the previous one, different from the same type experienced elsewhere and different from what we thought it would be.

The differences range from time of day, personnel at work, day of the week, the season, the extent of the emergency, people who may be on site who aren't normally on site, the cause of the emergency, the location of the emergency and whatever else is going on in the local community. And yet sometimes we as a society or company just do our best to remove flexibility from the equation.

For example, in June of 2008 we saw flooding throughout the Midwest with many comparisons to the great Flood of 1993 in the very same areas. We heard about this one being the 500 Year Flood and we saw once again that a levy system didn't hold up. Either because it was too low, too old or too over hyped. And maybe we are just fooling ourselves to think we can ever control and contain major rivers; much less allowing people to build homes and businesses in known flood plains (over 35,000 homes constructed since 1993 in areas that flooded in 1993). Why would we permit 35,000 homes to be constructed in an area that had a history of major flooding? Did we really think that the rivers would never flood again? And what options did we provide to the people who now live in those homes to respond and recover from a flood? We greatly diminished the flexibility the respond organizations might have.

Flexibility has to include making use of the resources that are available to us at the time and combining them with the training and the experience we have gained through drills and exercises and previous emergencies. If we know how to use a fire extinguisher because we have practiced using one outside of the workplace, doesn't it make sense that we can use that training/knowledge to successfully use a fire extinguisher in the office?

One of the hallmarks of a successful drills and exercise program is the variety of scenarios that are used. It is this variety of scenarios and their component problems that help to develop flexible thinking and responding to an emergency. It helps to create confidence in people, systems, equipment and relationships. And when all of this comes together and the organization successfully responds to and recovers from the emergency, to many on the outside it will appear that the company did succeed by "flying by the seat of their pants."

Twelve months ago how many of your firm's senior managers looked into their crystal balls and said that the greatest economic crash since the Great Depression was going to take place in the fall of 2008? And if any of you can say "yes" to that question, then how many of these extremely foresighted individuals then had the company prepared for the economic downturn? This economic condition is an emergency for many, many companies and their employees. But does any company ever conduct at least a tabletop exercise with the scenario being economic disaster?

For right now let's focus on two components of a preparedness program; training and exercises. Training is one half of the methodology for developing an automatic response to an

emergency. Training is considered successful when the trainees perform according to what was taught. For example, employees understanding the warning system when it activates and performing the necessary actions to shut down equipment, leave the area (or protect themselves) and be counted. When this occurs successfully many people assume the employees were just doing what comes naturally and it was a simple task.

When almost any task is done well it appears to be “easy.” Tiger Woods makes sinking a 40 foot putt look simple. He reads the green, calculates the speed, determines the break, subconsciously incorporates the experience of having practiced several thousand of the same type of putt, “puts on his game face”, says something to his caddie, makes a simple stroke and watches the ball go into the hole. On television it looks simple to the viewer and the commentator remarks about what a great putter he is. But if you or I go to that the same green, thousands of people around the green watching, millions on television watching, and a major championship on the line we may have to hit 1,000 putts before we get one to go in. But to the world Tiger’s putt looks easy.

Training provides everyone with the opportunity to build up a history of learning and accomplishment which will permit them to respond “effortlessly” to the emergency. It will seem that they are doing this very simply and naturally.

But what happens when the emergency is not exactly as the examples we trained on? What do we do then? We fly by the seat of our pants. It isn’t the same type of response we would make if we hadn’t had the training and it involves making use of that training. From my perspective, the Miracle on the Hudson of USAir Flight 1459 is a classic example of successfully “flying by the seat of your pants.” (Please excuse the pun.)

A senior pilot and flight crew found themselves in a situation in which the training they had received over the years was valid but the scenario was not exactly what they had trained for. Crash landing and evacuation of the plane had been drilled into them but none of them had ever done a real one before; much less having done a crash landing on water. You have a crew having to implement the training they have received, in a shorter period of time for preparation than normally associated with a crash, and doing the evacuation in water and not on land.

As it turns out some of the things they were taught to do in a crash on land don’t hold up as well on water. Like opening the rear evacuation doors when that is the part of the plane that is in the water; thus allowing the plane to begin to fill with water more quickly. And not having the opportunity to remind passengers to take floatation devices with them when exiting the aircraft.

Yet the pilot did know from his training and experience that he needed to keep the wings of the aircraft level, his airspeed just above the bare minimum and keep the nose of the aircraft up. And that river traffic on the Hudson would help to ensure a quick response to the aircraft.

This was a wonderful example of combining training, good instincts and “flying by the seat of your pants” resulting in everyone surviving and the world receiving the gift of an uplifting story.

The other component that is important is exercises. There are a number of different types of exercises that can be conducted but the main feature of everyone one of them is to instill in the participants the knowledge of what and how they are suppose to respond to the emergency.

Every time you conduct an evacuation drill you are reminding people of the actions they should be taking to save their lives. If you ever wondered about the value of these exercises, look at the number of lives that we saved on 9/11 when people who had practiced evacuating the World Trade Center did so for real. As horrific as the event was, it could have been much worse in terms of loss of life. And yet, when people were participating in evacuation drills do you think they had a scenario of two towers being struck by aircraft and both towers collapsing? Another example of combining knowledge, training and practice with “by the seat of your pants” to save more lives than statistics say should have been saved.

The “by the seat of your pants” is Flexibility. Flexibility is the ability to recognize that the situation before you is not exactly like the one you practiced, but the skills learned during the practice can be successfully applied in a different scenario.

The key difference in just “flying by the seat of your pants” and failing and “flying by the seat of your pants” and succeeding is the training and exercising you have done beforehand. Our “luck” increases the more we prepare.