

Help staff practice thinking on their feet to prepare for emergencies

Relying solely on written protocol can backfire in the thick of an emergency riddled with surprise contingencies. For example, if structural damage blocks an assigned evacuation route, school staff must quickly deduce the safest alternative course.

Key points

- Staff can panic, make mistakes in an emergency.
- Written protocol doesn't always address surprises.
- Sharpen staff thinking skills in question-driven training exercises. ■

Districts can best prepare for emergencies by providing training exercises that allow your staff to practice critical thinking skills, said Fred T. Leland Jr., founder of Law Enforcement & Security Consulting in North Attleboro, Mass. Leland, a lieutenant with

the Walpole Police Department in Massachusetts, prepared the Walpole High School staff and local responders for their first full-scale, realistic lockdown drill. He used a question-driven format practiced by the U.S. Marine Corps called Critical Question Mapping.

CQM originated with Terence Barnhart, a Pfizer drug company consultant who wanted to coax scientists to think more innovatively, Leland said. Barnhart observed that “when we think in statements we lock into what we have been told, but when we think in questions we open our orientation to see many better options,” Leland explained.

Leland shared lessons he learned in using CQM to train school crisis response teams.

■ **Start early to assemble trainees.** Picking a mutual training date when school, town, and local emergency leaders could all meet was very challenging, Leland said. “We adapted and changed dates several times due to scheduling conflicts,” he added. Some people had to search for scarce “white space on their calendars” to find time, he said.

■ **Develop hypothetical emergency scenario.** Schools can use CQM to prepare staff for various types of emergencies, including an accidental injury, a storm, or a fire, Leland said. He wanted to prepare the town for their first collaborative, realistic school lockdown and response drill last October. So, using CQM, he challenged trainees to think of situations they could face while trying to “lockdown the school,

stop the ongoing threat, safely unlock and evacuate more than 1,300 people, and then prepare for the aftermath.” Officials can also use CQM after a crisis to debrief staff and improve the school’s next response, he said.

■ **Ask trainees to brainstorm contingencies.** Trainees spent 20 minutes practicing critical thinking, Leland said. Everyone listed contingencies they could face in the proposed training scenario, a lockdown in this case, he said. For example, someone asked, “What do we do if we have to lock down the campus as students are boarding buses?” Most schools schedule drills when students are in classrooms, Leland noted. Staff could be caught off guard if a principal ordered a lockdown while students were outdoors, in hallways, or in bus loading zones, he said.

■ **Share responses with group.** Groups posted their questions on nearby walls. Leland didn’t add questions, but stuck to a facilitator’s role, he said.

■ **Practice working together.** Initially, people huddled within their own separate departments, Leland said. School, police, fire, emergency, public works, and health department leaders generated their own separate questions, he said. Rather than change trainees’ seats, Leland asked everyone the question, “Do you all work alone in your efforts to solve this problem?” The answer was immediately, “No, we do not.” So, Leland then asked, “How do we fix this in a way that helps us collaborate in our efforts?” He added, “You have 20 minutes to come up with this solution.” People emerged from their isolated groups to post their notes together on one wall, he said.

■ **Arrange question in causal order.** As trainees arranged their notes so each issue was mapped out in a logical sequence, “the room got loud as conversations between departments began to take shape,” Leland said. They “shaped and reshaped the flow of notes,” he added.

■ **Practice resolving challenges.** Once people had the flow map of questions arranged to their satisfaction, they practiced thinking critically to answer each one, Leland said. They addressed 68 critical questions in about two hours, he said. As folks reviewed their work, they removed overlapping issues and filled in missing gaps of information, he said. They set aside some issues for future training sessions, he added.

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