

How FEMA Can Be Effective and Quick in Recovering Damages from Disasters

Zihan Qin^{1, a}

¹Shanghai WLSA Academy, Shanghai, 200000, China

^aZihanqin2021@163.com

Abstract

This paper discusses the main changes FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) need to make in order to be more effective after the false and messy rescue plan after Hurricane Katrina. Since FEMA deals with emergencies, the most crucial change is to speed up. Instead of the current bureaucracy, the organization should give more power to separated offices to eliminate the time during passing messages. In each department, authoritative leadership and direct orders should be encouraged, so that each branch is able to arrange and cooperate with other emergency organizations to solve urgent problems. In order to maintain the honesty and willingness of employees, the working environment should be friendly and encourage the development of social responsibility. Ultimately, FEMA can maximize its social value and win public trust.

Keywords

Hurricane Katrina; Leadership style; Organization strategy; Workplace Climate.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hurricane Katrina is considered the most striking and damaging natural disaster in America in 2005. It has caused “\$40.6 billion and more than 1.7 million claims – across six states” [1]. During and after the damage, Federal Emergency Management Agency, abbreviated as FEMA, works to “reduce the loss of life and property and protect the Nation from all hazards” [2]. However, seeing the huge loss after the disaster, rather than complaining about the nature damage, the public transferred their blame to FEMA for their low efficiency, which led to a reformation of their organization plans. According to FEMA’s plan, they work toward: first, faster and more efficient reaction toward damage; second, trust of the public [2]. I believe that the goal changes direct FEMA to a positive future. To achieve FEMA’s goal, it will change its current bureaucratic system to a system with separated power, promote leadership style of autocracy and broker, and encourage friendship and high moral standards in the working climate.

2. ORGANIZATION STRATEGY

When FEMA separates its decision-making power into smaller departments rather than centralizing power in a bureaucratic system, its speed of recovering hazards will be largely increased. Natural disasters, terrorism, or any other kinds of disasters are all difficult to predict and avoid with the current technology. When a terrifying disaster comes, local people have to call the emergency department to call to action and call to rescue. Since disasters happen quickly and randomly, emergency management has to gather rescue teams, suppliers, and other information transmitters to work to respond to people’s requests as quickly as possible to save more people. However, having a bureaucratic system determines that each command of the

center leadership needs to go through processes of formal handwritten contracts and agreements from people in lower layers [3]. However, according to Sobel and Leeson, the process in the hierarchy involves “too many individuals and groups” having “access to the decision-making process with overlapping powers of obstruction”. In addition, they term the situation “tragedy of political commons” [4]. To solve this problem, I will dismiss the hierarchy yet divide the decision power into groups separated in different regions. When a disaster comes, regional respondents can meet residents’ calls and get the local rescue team’s help. The local department does not need to report it to the top but to take action on themselves. This decision on the organization is proved to be effective when facing troubles. For instance, the director of the U.S. Coast Guard, Thad Allen, decided to start its helicopter rescue efforts without waiting for approval or command from FEMA. Despite being dismissed for disobeying the rules, Allen was remembered for “his leadership in times of crises and his tremendous ability to effect change in an ever-changing world” [5]. Allen’s successful decision proves that being quick at acting is the key in emergence rescue and speed is what a bureaucratic system lacks. Without a bureaucracy, but with a power-separated system, each department can have more freedom and efficiency to rescue.

3. LEADERSHIP STYLE

Since the leaders of offices in different regions are the first decision-makers when emergency comes, as the leader of FEMA, I will select carefully on their leadership traits: in each office, the leader should be autocratic and be a broker. First, leaders should be autocratic because they need to quickly give orders in response to emergence incidents. One problem with bureaucracy previously discussed is that lower departments have to wait for the leaders’ command which slows down all processes. According to a journal about experience with Hurricane Katrina, the federal rescue teams were “staging awaiting official orders from FEMA on where to go and what to do” and remaining on “standby” due to hesitance of leaders [6]. If leaders of the local department are decisive, orders can be made much quicker. Second, a leader should be a broker, which is described to be “politically acclimated, persuasive, influential and powerful” [7]. When recovering disasters, other agencies are working with FEMA: firefighter, medical, and military departments and other private sectors. The leaders need to cooperate and discuss with leaders in other organizations, so having the skills and confidence of a diplomat is important. Without these abilities, cooperation can be disordered. For example, in the author of the journal says that the communication between departments is struggling and ineffective. He criticized that it is “politically incorrect to ‘self-deploy’” while he saw that firefighters in IAFF (International Association of Fire Fight) had to use their personal calls to get help and relay information on their whereabouts and needs [6]. FEMA, as the major leading organization in the chaos, should be responsible for communicating and clarifying plans with all cooperators. The requirement of diplomatic communication between organizations requires the leader to be a broker. Eventually, the process of rescuing can be more successful.

4. WORKPLACE CLIMATE

The workplace climate will be friendly and workers will have a relationship of brotherhood to create confidence and feelings of reliability and trustworthiness. The main reason for this setting of the environment is to avoid unnecessary interpersonal conflict. Employees should be calm when facing any sporadic task, so they must not fight among themselves to make chaos which fails the task. Interpersonal conflicts usually generate from confusions in one’s “interpretations about the beliefs of others with their actual intent” because humans are commonly “self-centered” [8]. People need to “accept the others point of view” to avoid conflicts [9]. To accept others, people have to understand and hold the same moral value as them.

Friendship is needed for understanding each other. According to Professor Teresa Amabile of Harvard Business School, who gets a conclusion after analyzing over 200 entries of employees, friendship in the workplace contributes to “a sense of bonding and mutual trust”, which promotes comprehension and resemble teams [10]. Then, the positive moral value, that it is self-accomplishing and model to help ordinary people who suffer from disasters, should be instilled in employees. According to Abraham Maslow’s theory of Need Hierarchy, most employees consider their physiological and security needs before social needs, self-esteem, and self-actualization [9]. However, the employees of FEMA demonstrate a contradiction because while knowing that they face danger in work, which belongs to the two prioritized considerations, they still choose to do this job. To avoid complaining or pessimistic emotions, FEMA should strengthen the teaching of the value of social need and emphasize why they do it to increase their faith [8]. In this way, employees have the same belief in their job which contributes to peace and unity. This can be created from an encouraging climate. Considering the need of employees’ attitude and requirements in work, the working climate has to be friendly and brotherhood like to achieve more effective work.

5. CONCLUSION

The events that FEMA faces are all emergency incidents, the keyword to them should be “fast”. The organization should replace the bureaucracy to separate offices to speed up working rate. In each separated branch, leaders should have autocratic leadership involving the ability to arrange and influence other organizations. For keeping workers honest and willing, the working climate for the workers should be friendly and encouraging to foster a sense of social responsibility. After the changes, FEMA increases their speed of communication, deployment, and coordination, which makes their work much more effective in recovering disasters. Eventually, FEMA can maximize its social value and becomes reputable among the public.

REFERENCES

- [1] “Hurricane Katrina Fact File”. Insurance Information Institution, 2006. <https://www.iii.org/sites/default/files/docs/pdf/Hurricane%20Katrina%20Fact%20File.pdf>
- [2] “FEMA Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2008 – 2013”, FEMA P-422, 2008, https://www.fema.gov/pdf/about/fy08_fema_sp_bookmarked.pdf
- [3] “Formal Organizations: Crash Course Sociology #17.” YouTube, uploaded by Crash Course, 11 July 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDuBh7VbGgU>
- [4] Sobel, R. S., & Leeson, P. T. (2006). Government’s Response to Hurricane Katrina: A Public Choice Analysis. *Public Choice*, 127(1/2), 55–73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30026772>
- [5] “Thad W. Allen”. U.S. Department of Defense, <https://www.defense.gov/About/Biographies/Biography/Article/602793/>
- [6] Rhode, David. “Katrina: ‘Brotherhood VS. Bureaucracy’.” *fireengineering.com*, 2006, <https://www.fireengineering.com/firefighting/katrina-ldquobrotherhood-vs-bureaucracyrdquo/>
- [7] Quinn, Robert. *Beyond Rational Management: Mastering the Paradoxes and Competing Demands of High Performance*. Jossey-Bass, 1992. <https://primarygoals.com/teams/books/beyond-rational-management/#:~:text=The%20facilitator%20is%20expected%20to%20foster%20collective%20effort%2C,role%2C%20the%20leader%20is%20described%20as%20process%20oriented.>
- [8] Lytle, Tamara. “How to Resolve Workplace Conflicts.” *shrm.org*, 13 July 2015, <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/Pages/070815-conflict-management.aspx>
- [9] Kondalkar. *Organizational Behavior*. New Age International, 2007.

- [10] Wood, Johnny. "Why it's good to turn your colleagues into friends." World Economic Forum, 22 Nov 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/11/friends-relationships-work-productivity-career/>