

AN URGENT NEED FOR ACTION

Five Lessons for Responding to Disaster: What Hurricane Katrina Should Teach Us All

As we reflect on the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, there is one lesson that stands above all the rest: effective federal government is absolutely essential. It was effective government that rescued hundreds of people from rooftops and fed, housed and treated thousands more. It was also the lack of effective government that contributed to the failure of the levees and left people stranded at the Superdome and Convention Center in unacceptable conditions.

We must learn from Hurricane Katrina and act now to ensure our government is prepared for the nation's next major challenge—whatever it is. Outlined below are the critical lessons we should have learned and upon which we must now act:

1. *For good results, government needs good people.*

Any organization's greatest asset is its people; the government is no exception. To truly concentrate on repairing government's response to any national challenge, we must learn the lesson discussed in the 9-11 Commission report: the quality of the people is more important than the quality of the wiring diagrams."

In order to attract quality people into its ranks, the government must dedicate itself to becoming an employer of choice—a place where dedicated public servants are well led, well trained, empowered and rewarded for their service to our nation.

2. *Coordination is king.*

Our federal government must improve its capacity to work as a network; no response will be effective if it is not coordinated at all levels and with all components of communities. In an era when needed services and resources are provided by all levels of government and different sectors of society, the federal government must be able to play the role of coordinator, as well as responder. Specifically:

- Our federal government must do a better job coordinating amongst itself to bring all of its assets to bear during a major emergency.
- Our federal government must increase communication and coordination with the state and local leaders in affected regions.

- Our federal government needs to include all components of a community in its preparation and response. It needs to devise ways to leverage non-government resources by working with the private sector and voluntary communities.

3. *We must learn from our mistakes, but also our successes.*

There is no denying that government at all levels underprepared for the storm and mounted an inadequate response, leaving too many in need and too many challenges unmet. Out of the devastation, however, are inspiring stories of Americans at their best, many of them federal government employees. These are stories of government officials who responded quickly and effectively to help citizens in dire need. To learn all the lessons of the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, we must see the whole picture—the good and the bad—and figure out how to emulate the best aspects of the response in the future while avoiding the worst.

Without question, one key theme appears from all the success stories: employees must be trained and then empowered to make decisions in the field. The Coast Guard performed well after Katrina because Coast Guard personnel are trained throughout their careers to make critical decisions under often dire circumstances. We must invest in creating a top-notch federal workforce that is able and empowered to innovate during crises.



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4. *Long-term challenges require long-term solutions.*

Solutions to many of the management challenges facing our government will likely take years of work and dedication. To that end, we urge the appointment of a Chief Management Officer (CMO) in federal agencies, a proven professional with a track record of success in transforming the core management functions of an organization, including human resources, information technology, and financial management. The CMO will be charged with looking five years down the road to understand what management challenges loom and to ensure that plans are developed and implemented to meet those challenges.

5. *We must pay now, or we will pay later.*

The actions outlined above will require resources—money, time and an engaged leadership that prioritizes these issues. Improving federal preparedness and response will require significant changes in culture, mindset and processes. Training and otherwise enabling federal officials to manage these changes successfully will require a substantial investment—of dollars, yes, but also of time and intellectual capital. But it is an investment that will more than pay for itself over time. We have already learned, the hard way, the consequences of under-investing in disaster preparedness and response.

