



Short communication  
**Preparing for major incidents**

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**Abstract**

Major incidents occurred, occur and will still occur all over the world, at any place at any time. Such an event is not always handled like it should and could be. The reason for this is not necessarily a deficiency in preplanning or the non-existence of procedures or guidelines. A possible solution to make things work more fluidly could be the creation of a genuine vision and mission statement on disaster handling followed by the alignment of all involved services within the statement. This would be a real challenge for all authorities and services involved in the planning phase and the preparation for major incidents.

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**1. Introduction**

Major incidents occurred, occur and will still occur all over the world, at any place at any time. You could expect that people and especially the official authorities are learning from all those sad experiences. But, looking back upon the last few years, we have to admit that from an international point of view, the world is still badly prepared to handle those major incidents especially when due to such an incident a lot of people have lost their lives. This observation is not only correct when the event takes place in a so-called underdeveloped country. Thinking about the landfall of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in August 2005 it is also true for a well-organized and industrialised superpower as the United States of America.

How is this possible? There is no clear answer, no recipe how to handle a major incident, no unique and universal guidelines how to prepare for a disaster. Each disaster is completely different. A major incident can be classified by its nature (disasters in transport/natural disasters/war and terrorism), which means that it has or has not to be considered as a crime scene. Each of those events can also be subdivided again by its type: open, closed or mixed disaster, taking into account the kind of victims you have to deal with. This has an effect on the easiness or difficulty to determine the number and the identity of the victims involved. Other variables are the amplitude of the

territory hit by the incident, the number of victims and the general situation of communication lines, which are still working and a lot of other miscellaneous external inputs, which have an important effect on how to handle such an event. A major incident is such a complex situation that nobody can give a magic formula to manage it in an almost perfect way.

Does this imply that you cannot prepare for a major incident? Of course not, you can prepare. If so, what can be the reason why a lot of the major incidents are handled in such a sad way?

**2. The facts**

Reading through several official debriefings in the aftermath of a disaster – at least if they are organised and if they are published – the same observations are often found. Different other sources such as books about one or another major incident or articles in newspapers are generally describing the same failures. Even during conferences and meetings among specialists on the subject you can hear the lecturers describing the same problems they faced before, during and after major events. A selection of common remarks follows: “it was a first time occurrence, underestimating the threat to be involved in a major incident as an authority, underestimating the scale and the effects of the incident once it has happened, no genuine motivation to learn from other events, lack of co-ordination between authorities and/or services dealing with the event, lack of leadership, misinformation, an overwhelming amount of information, lack of proper information channels, lack of resources, no inventory of the resources that already exist,

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isolated (good intended) initiatives, lack of preparation, lack of training, no inventory of the procedures to use, no global approach of the measures to undertake, etc. . . .”

And those kinds of observations are even heard from those who are well aware of the saying “failing to plan is planning to fail” and have prepared themselves for handling a major incident or learned from the disasters they have already dealt with. All this is bitter reality, nevertheless the last decades authorities of many countries – not only Western European countries – have done a lot to be better prepared to face a major incident of whatever kind. Procedures exist at local and national level to deal with such events. Even at international level the United Nations, Interpol and also the European Union have created scripts on how to handle worst case scenarios.

But even when a bunch of well thought out procedures, guidelines and best practices exist, things are not always going as it could and should be.

Personally, the best description on the response to give to a major incident can be found in the published field guide on this issue [1]: “preserving the dignity of the deceased, while meeting the rights and needs of the living, and the requirements of governmental investigations”. This signifies clearly that it is a combined action of different services, disciplines and agencies, both public and private that have or should have the same goal. Could it be problems occur when one or more members of the team of people responsible to manage the incident, perhaps by lack of understanding, either give priority to their agencies’ need or fail to accept that all requirements must be fulfilled? If so, what can be done about this?

### 3. A promising solution

Maybe we can find an answer in the way a lot of non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) are performing their job. In fact, they don’t talk about “their job”, they talk about “their task”. On the same hand, they declare that they have a “mission” summarised in a “mission statement”, in a “charter” or at least in a “philosophy”. NGO’s exist and are obtaining results because their members are inspired by a vision.

“Vision and mission” are the key components to make things work. This opinion, based upon scientific research is also shared by a lot of successful companies, organizations and administrations. The first research and the outcome of it in 1994 [2] has been reviewed and confirmed by two other research projects [3,4]: vision is the crucial element essential for any lasting achievement. It helps people make smart choices because their decisions are made with the desired end result in mind [5].

For that reason, I am not afraid to state that the preparation for handling major incidents also starts with the creation of a vision and a real mission statement by all the different bodies which are involved in the handling of a major incident. The second step will be to align all personnel of those bodies towards the “vision and mission” statement. From that moment on, these statements have to be used to guide everyday decision making at all levels and to develop goals, strategies, tactics and action plans (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The utmost responsibility of an management is to develop a hierarchy of strategic intent incorporating a consistent and mutually supportive set of vision, mission, goals and objectives.

At the moment we often see official bodies and organizations preparing for major incidents producing action plans and procedures that are not based upon a strategy and certainly not upon a vision or a mission to accomplish. In the best case, some major actors may have the feeling of a mission but it is not expressed in writing and not shared with all the players. This makes any alignment of the staff on a vision and mission impossible.

The purpose of a vision statement is to create an aligned organization where everyone is working towards the same desired ends. Why is this alignment so crucial? Because all major incident planning will stand or fall on the actions of those who must implement it. To know “what we stand for” and “where we want to go” will give the consciousness of “why we want to be part of this”. When people sometimes do not have a clear vision and understanding of their role and place especially during the disaster planning phase, this core deficiency then trickles down and translates into a general lack of direction and responsibility. A group of people preparing for major incidents coming from different official bodies and disciplines needs a clear common vision in order to be able to infuse a sense of common direction to their people and to inspire them. Afterwards, each service can create their vision and mission statement to empower their action during a major incident. Without it, the procedure risks becoming a self-serving bureaucracy.

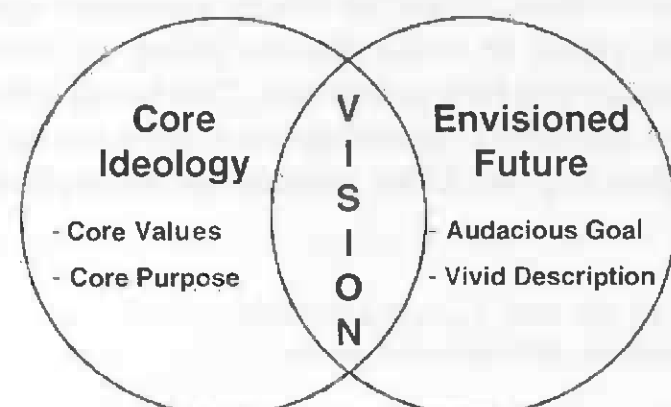


Fig. 2. Vision is more than just good intention or wishful thinking.

#### 4. The vision and mission thing

What exactly is a vision and mission statement? It is certainly not a muddled stew of values, goals, purposes, philosophies, beliefs, aspirations, norms, strategies and descriptions. They are usually a boring, confusing, structurally unsound stream of words that evoke the response “True, but who cares?” Most of the time you will see it end in a forgotten file or framed on a wall solely for decoration [6].

I strongly believe that authorities responsible for major incident handling can and must create a genuine overall vision and mission statement together with each service involved. Such a statement has to give an expression of the core ideology and the goals of the organization (Fig. 2). The core ideology must guide, be meaningful and inspirational to the people inside the organization and makes you feel free to change anything that is not part of it within the organization. It is composed by core values and a core purpose. The core values are a system of guiding principles and tenets of intrinsic value for the organization’s being, that will never change, even when they could become a disadvantage in certain situations. The core purpose is the organization’s most fundamental reason for existence, which reflects people’s idealistic motivations for doing the work and which captures the soul of the organization’s existence. This core purpose may not be confused with specific goals or strategies.

To make alignment on the vision and mission possible, an Envisioned Future has also to be produced. An audacious goal has to be chosen and explained to all parties through a vivid description to motivate, to create commitment and unity.

Only this will give different services and disciplines the “we will make it all together” feeling needed to forge a team prepared to react adequately when a major incident occurs. Appendix A illustrates this principle.

#### 5. Conclusion

The preparation for major incidents starts with creating a genuine vision and mission statement to guide and inspire all agencies to work towards a common goal fully respecting all requirements of disaster handling. It is fundamental for a visionary and successful organization, whatever field it is working in and especially when it is an ad hoc organization, is to preserve the core and to stimulate progress. Vision provides the context for bringing this dynamic to life. Building such an organization requires 1% vision and 99% alignment towards that vision. It cannot be repeated enough: creating alignment is the most important work to perform. Through this alignment, each of the players will understand for whom they are working in the handling of a major incident and the reasons why it is important to have a global approach, why it is important to respect each other area of responsibility, why it is necessary to

continuously improve their technical skills, why co-operation between different disciplines is a must, why ... At this moment, they will be ready to adopt these reasons, to behave accordingly and to give the best of themselves. Disaster handling is not a job, it is a mission-based upon a vision.

#### Appendix A. Vision and mission statement disaster victim identification team federal police Belgium

The core values of the disaster victim identification team are:

- Helpfulness
- Dedication
- Respect
- Humanity
- Availability

**With the purpose** to provide the next of kin the possibility to perform the burial ritual necessary for their mourning process in giving them back the mortal remains of their beloved ones.

**And therefore**, we will as an interdisciplinary team, with a scientific and global approach, use every possible means to reach our goal. We will also continuously strive to optimize our actions through self-assessment and a search for new techniques and technology.



“To speak for the dead, to protect the living”

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