

So your community doesn't have an emergency plan ...

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My crisis definition is:

"A turning point, a decisive, critical time which threatens great danger **if not handled properly.**"



The Chinese symbol for crisis is a combination of two symbols: "danger" and "opportunity," called Wei-ji. What this tells us is we must learn from the past – from breakdown comes breakthrough.

It is important to recognize that when things go wrong, you get one chance to get it right. Surviving the first 48 hours of a crisis means you need to be first, be right and be credible.

However, most elected officials and senior administration are too preoccupied with the day-to-day running of the community to worry about the possibility of needing an emergency plan.

As a result, and in spite of provincial and territorial legislation, many Canadian communities do not have up-to-date emergency plans or have no plans at all.

If there is a plan it is often outdated and no one has responsibility for maintenance. At best it is handed over to the Fire Chief for him or her to "manage".

This is a direct reflection of the public's perception about the need to plan for emergencies. Citizens would sooner have their tax dollars spent on new roads, parks, athletic facilities, retirement homes, etc., than on an emergency plan.

The problem is described by John Clague, National Hazard Research Center, Simon Fraser University, as Rare Event Syndrome: "The potential for catastrophe is real but the frequency is low; therefore, people do not take the threat seriously".

This changes when things do go wrong, as will inevitably happen. Then citizens demand to know what is occurring, but because the organization does not have a strategic, proactive, timely plan, information vital to helping the public cope with the situation is withheld.

People want to be told what is happening. Without a plan, public officials fear the release of information, because they don't think the public will understand.

We need to have more faith in the public. U.S. President Abraham Lincoln said: "I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon ^{to} meet any crisis. The important point is to bring them the real facts."

How does this play out in real life? Well, British Columbians know they are living on a major earthquake zone, with Vancouver itself straddling a significant fault line. Because there has not been a major quake in living memory, people are complacent.

CTV BC News recently conducted a poll to determine public readiness in the event of a catastrophic event, asking: "Do you have an emergency plan in place?" The answers were as follows:

Completely ready at any time	8%
Sort of but need warning time	11%
No plan in place	81%

Until recently, there was little incentive for public officials to change this situation. Now, however, a new sense of urgency has now been introduced on the scene.

According to the Canadian Press, a multimillion-dollar lawsuit has been filed against the town of L'Isle-Verte near Lac Mégantic, Quebec, in which 32 people died in a fire at a seniors' home in January 2014.

The owners of the residence and their insurer allege in their \$3.8-million lawsuit that numerous mistakes "resulted in a human catastrophe that could have been avoided or at least been of lesser magnitude."

The lawsuit alleges the town failed to implement emergency plans to cope with such a disaster. It says the failure of town officials to prepare for such a catastrophe showed a "reckless disregard for the lives of others, particularly the elderly in the Residence du Havre."

They argue they had been asking the town to devise contingency plans for five years: "This lack of planning ... meant that municipal employees improvised ... and made serious mistakes", the lawsuit says.

The lawsuit also alleges that one fire truck arrived at the scene of the blaze within 15 minutes and that several additional minutes passed before another arrived. It argues the numbers were insufficient, that the fire trucks were not equipped with appropriate ladders to rescue people in the seniors' home and that the town's volunteer firefighters did not have the proper equipment to provide emergency care.

The document also alleges that tensions between the fire departments in L'Isle-Verte and nearby Riviere-du-Loup, which was better equipped for the situation, contributed to the lack of planning.

You can bet that municipalities across Canada will be watching this trial with great interest.

Another motivating factor is the speed with which information about a disaster now spreads. Look at the chaos caused by the recent bus roll over near Merritt, BC. This happened 25 miles from a small community in the BC interior. Within minutes it was a worldwide story and every action of the first responders was under the microscope.

The lessons we need to take away from these examples are simple: have an emergency plan, test the plan and update it regularly. Catastrophe can strike at any time.