Anatomy of a Meeting During an Emergency

Introduction

Managing a public meeting during an emergency can be a very different experience from managing other types of public meetings. For one thing, participants are usually fearful about an incident that threatens them, or they think might threaten them.

One of the distinguishing features of a public meeting during an emergency is the immediacy of the threat. Most public meetings I manage in my everyday job deal with some future event: a plan that needs to be discussed, ideas that need to be generated, feedback that needs to be heard, and decisions that need to be made. Emergency public meetings are often different; they are designed to replace fear and confusion with knowledge; to empower people, either by sharing knowledge about what is going on now or establishing ways for people to learn accurate information about the emergency as it continues to develop.

This all sounds pretty straight forward. People have a need for information and the people managing the incident provide it. A simple sounding process of providing what people need and want; and, sometimes this is all there is to it. This paper was developed because that simple straight line process doesn’t always happen. People always have a need for accurate up-to-date information and that part of the meeting usually goes pretty well. I’ve found that it’s in the question and answer period that things can go haywire. It’s then that you discover that some people came to the meeting with agendas that are very different from yours.

This paper was written is to help public information officers (PIOs) better prepare for a successful meeting by thinking about what might happen before, during, and after the meeting. The following worksheets are designed to aid incident commanders, agency administrators, and other meeting planners, set-up and conduct a successful public meeting. The worksheets include ideas that were distilled from comments provided by PIOs from across the country who have managed both large and small emergency public meetings.

Included with this write-up is a sample of PIO public meeting experiences I call “Tales from Meetings Past” that are written in the PIOs own words. They will take you to a sample of their meetings and you’ll feel the challenges they faced and the lessons they learned. The sample provided is of the ugly and bad with a few good mixed in. Most meetings turn out fine, and some are more challenging.

Good luck with your meetings and keep refining the anatomy of meetings during an emergency.

Anatomy of a Public Meeting During An Emergency

Planning Worksheet

Did the agency administrator or unit PAO give you any direction about public meetings during the in-briefing or delegation of authority?

Why are you having the meeting?

How urgent is the need to meet? Today Tonight Tomorrow \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Communities in imminent danger

Rumors

Agency administrator’s desire

Elected officials desire

Community leaders desire

Who is the responsible official?

How do you they want to be involved in the meeting?

Open meeting

Close meeting

Answer questions

What are their objectives?

Who do they want involved?

Specialists

Agencies

Elected officials

Affected communities

Others

Who will invite agencies, elected officials, etc. to participate?

PIO

Liaison officer

Agency Rep

Unified commander

IC

When will you brief the participants on the agenda and meeting expectations?

Agenda

Order of presentation speakers

Time estimates

One hour is often optimum

Presenters are involved in managing the emergency and need to return

Will there be other meetings? When?

Keep track of promises.

Who opens and closes the meeting?

Acknowledge interagency cooperation but try not to make this a dominate part of the public meeting

Who are the opinion leaders?

Elected officials

Community leaders

How will you notify the public?

Word of mouth - key community contacts

Phone trees

Social media

Media release

Inciweb

Handouts

Posters

Other agencies

Media contacts

Other

Who is the anticipated audience?

Locals

Media

Elected officials

Agency personnel

Community leaders

What are the objectives of the meeting?

Provide access to the responsible agency official or their representative

Introduce agency people involved in the incident

Update on the situation

Evacuation information

Road closure information

Answer questions

Inform how they can obtain additional information

What issues do you anticipate from the audience?

Incident related

Burnout

Evacuation

Initial attack

Aircraft availability

Use of local resources – equipment, personnel

Road closures

Emergency assistance – Food, clothing, shelter, loans,

Public information

Other?

Agency related

Previous incidents – loss of homes, fire fighting techniques, unresolved issues

Policy issues – clearances, use of aircraft,

What issues will be addressed at the meeting?

Who will address?

When will they be addressed?

During the meeting?

After the meeting?

At another time?

Ground rules

Audience generated – facilitator suggests

Advantage – better buy in by audience

Facilitator generated

Advantage – preprinted, takes less time

Sample ground rules

One person speaks at a time

Raise hand

Hold questions until the end of the presentations

Assume everyone will want to ask a question – be concise – no statements and questions, if possible. Assume each question will take two minutes. One hundred people times two minutes equals 200 minutes of time; can’t stay that long.

No rebuttals to audience generated statements.

Speak respectfully

Some questions can’t be answered by the presenters

Some questions will be answered after the meeting one on one.

Do you anticipate drunken people will be in the audience? - bar near the meeting room, tailgating before the meeting?

How will you manage the audience?

Announce during ground rules?

Have law enforcement in the audience?

How many people are expected?

What meeting facilities are available?

Community center

Schools

Churches

Amphitheaters

Arenas

Incident base

Overflow contingency

PA system extensions

TV monitors

Chairs

Meeting place agreement needed?

Yes –

Finance section chief

No

Double check –

Thank yous

Parking?

Safe –

On street

Off street

Parking lots

Parking signing

Adequate

Inadequate

Are parking attendants needed?

Do you need ground support to help?

Disabled people

Seating

Parking

Signing

Non-English speaking?

Interpreter?

Sign language?

PA system

Who will provide?

Back up necessary?

Batteries?

Laser pointer?

Batteries?

Visuals

Sized for the room?

Rule of thumb – 1/4 inch letters for each three feet of viewing distance

Projected? Need supporting equipment

Computer

Projector

Extension cords

Computer table

Thumb drive

Screen

Extra plugs

Facilitator

Team provided?

Skill level – Is this a complex meeting?

Do you need to bring in a neutral agency facilitator?

Neutrality

Attire – uniform, no uniform, fire shirt

Manage the process not the content

PIO other than the facilitator available to answer questions about incident information activities.

IC or IC Representative

Approve the agenda

Attire – Agency uniform? Fire shirt? Team wear?

Paramedic?

Heat exhaustion

Pre-existing conditions

Logistics

Key staff briefed on how to get to the location

Travel maps – driving time estimates

Safety issues – driving times, weather, road conditions

Vehicles

Who’s driving?

How many vehicles?

Who’s hauling the equipment?

Does ground support need to help?

Meeting materials

GIS maps Size and number each

Main display

Google earth

Smaller display maps for close viewing

Community map – shows community landmarks, topo features, containment areas

Operations map

Videos

Infrared?

Other

Handouts

Maps

Agendas

Daily updates

Other

Agenda poster?

Signing

Meeting

Parking

Community message boards

Water, Cups,

Greeters

People to welcome audience and hand out materials and clean up the meeting area afterwards.