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.