

Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't: The Invisible Burden of Emergency Management

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In emergency management, success often looks like an overreaction. When we fail, the question is, "Why didn't you prevent this?" When we succeed, the question is, "Why did we spend so much when nothing happened?"

The graphic "Life of an EM" perfectly encapsulates the paradox. It's a snapshot of a profession that lives in the tension between preparedness and perception, prevention and public misunderstanding.

The Preparedness Paradox

Let's start with the reality: **Good emergency management is invisible.** When things go wrong, people notice. When things go right, they assume it will never go wrong in the first place.

This is the **preparedness paradox**—when you do your job well, your work is considered unnecessary. When you don't, it's seen as incompetence. And in both scenarios, you might find yourself out of a job.

"**An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,**" Benjamin Franklin famously said. But try pitching that ounce of prevention to a city council watching every tax dollar or a boardroom with short-term ROI on the brain. If nothing happens, the investment looks like a waste.

Why the Work Still Matters

So why do we do it?

Because we're not in this field for recognition. We're here for **resilience**, community, and saving lives. We're in this to **stand in the gap before the storm hits**, knowing we may never be thanked—and often may be blamed.

We choose this path not because it's easy but because we believe that **proactive leadership is the only leadership that matters when lives are on the line.**

Leading Through the Paradox

Here are four ways emergency managers—and leaders in general—can lead through this paradox:

1. **Tell the Story Before the Crisis**

- Communicate the *why* of prevention in compelling, human terms. Not just dollars saved, but lives preserved, trauma avoided, and businesses kept open.
- Translate preparedness into stories that resonate.

2. Measure What Didn't Happen

- Use data to illustrate near-misses, projected impacts avoided, and readiness benchmarks achieved.
- Create “what-if” scenarios to show the cost of inaction.

3. Own the Narrative

- Don't wait until you're defending your job to lead the messaging. Do it early, often, and confidently.
- Frame success as “quiet excellence,” not waste.

4. Build Political and Public Will

- Invest in relationships. Educate stakeholders regularly, not just during budget season or post-disaster hearings.
- Leadership is influence. Get upstream of the decision-makers before the next crisis tests your credibility.

Final Thought

If you're in emergency management, you're not just fighting fires or planning evacuations. You're fighting for belief—in prevention, foresight, and the unseen value of what didn't happen.

To the outside world, you may seem paranoid or overly cautious. But your work is heroic to the people who will never know how close they came to tragedy.

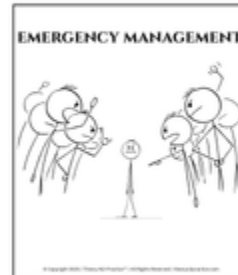
The work may be invisible. ***But you are not.***

Let's keep showing up, even when the world doesn't understand why.

References and Further Reading

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