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ABSTRACT

The Student Conservation Association (SCA) runs backcountry programs in wilderness settings, providing both an educational experience for participants and badly needed conservation work on public lands. As part of its risk management efforts, SCA has developed an emergency response system that ties resources in the field to all the resources of the organization as a whole, and that allows the organization to be aware of issues in the field. A carefully researched emergency response plan for each field activity identifies resources and available communications. Organizationally, on-call duty officers are a liaison and support to field staff and can connect them to a sophisticated communications system. This arrangement provides logistical and emotional support to field staff, manages internal and external communication, and assures incident documentation. The new comprehensive emergency response system utilizes many levels of staff expertise, uses staff time and resources more efficiently, and lowers costs. Four critical tools for implementing an organizational emergency response plan are the written plan itself, communications technology, staff training in emergency protocols and communications, and annual systemwide evaluation. Suggestions are offered for creating an emergency response system with limited resources. (SV)

Emergency Response Systems for Outdoor Programming

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Abstract

As outdoor program administrators, we spend a large portion of our time anticipating and managing the risk associated with our programs. Unfortunately, many times we end up focusing our limited time and resources toward developing and enhancing the "in the field" response and neglect investigating and developing a more global organizational response to managing crisis situations. This paper will focus on developing and implementing an organizational Emergency Response System (ERS) that links the folks in the field who are managing a crisis with the resources, expertise, and support of your entire organization.

It is particularly important for folks reading this paper to realize that, although SCA's ERS is large, "national" in scope, and utilizes technological "whiz-bangs", Emergency Response Systems, in their most simplistic form, are relatively easy to implement. The bottom line is, starting an ERS is a matter of investing an appropriate amount of staff time to pull together the documentation - documentation that may already exist in your organization's various handbooks and manuals.

Keeping that thought in mind, the author will discuss the Student Conservation Association's Emergency Response System as a model that provides emotional and logistical support to field staff, manages internal and external communication (media, parents, staff, etc..), and provides a mechanism for incident documentation and tracking. The author will also explore the tools necessary for implementing an Emergency Response System including technology (ESA system, www interface, pagers, cell phones, radios), written plans and protocols (Duty Officer Handbook, ERPs), staff training (Duty Officer system), and evaluation. - Kurt Merrill

Introduction

The key to running a safe and successful experientially based outdoor program is in anticipating and managing risk. This is not, of course, a particularly profound statement. As the final decade of the twentieth century winds down, professional standards in our "industry" for the technical qualifications and proficiency of field staff continue to grow. Training for both staff and program participants is continuing to become more sophisticated, resulting in specific and specialized certifications. Efforts to document protocols for participant medical screening, wilderness evacuations and for the many other activities our programs employ in the field have become so formalized that many of these publications are now available at your local bookstore.

Why is it then, when we are investing so much time, energy and capital into our "in the field" piece of what we do, that so many of us have yet to apply the same resources to developing a formal administrative response to crisis in the field? This question is actually far too easy to answer.

Perhaps the most compelling reality in our industry, the realm of the non-profit, is that when a staff member has an extra hour of time to invest in program safety, it seems most beneficial to put that time into enhancing existing organizational risk assessment and prevention strategies. And when capital resources are tight to begin with, the day to day needs of your program are usually more competitive for your program's extra dollars than the development of an ERS system.

Another reality is that when a business is staffed with a bunch of folks who have field experience, judgment, and savvy, there is a tendency to rely on that staff expertise in a pinch, sometimes at the expense of more formalized planning. As these are the people who have more than likely helped develop the organizational response to a lost participant, or for managing an entire course's evacuation from a forest fire, this seems a reasonable cast of characters on which to rely.

This is how our emergency support system worked at The Student Conservation Association (SCA) for 30 of the last 40 years. Since 1957, SCA has been running backcountry programs in wilderness settings, providing both an educational experience for over thirty thousand participants, and a significant amount of badly needed conservation work on public lands. SCA field staff often "graduated" into key administrative posts, and utilizing their field experience, expended a tremendous amount of time and energy over those years developing appropriate protocols for safety on the work projects, operating vehicles, medical screening of students, and all other areas of risk management that are now part of the wilderness risk management culture.

But despite the commitment and effort, it became apparent to SCA management about ten years ago that there were not adequate protocols linking incident management at the field level with all of the resource and knowledge available throughout SCA administratively. No one likes to spend time contemplating the worst case scenarios, and SCA was fortunate enough to have the where-with-all to tackle this task without a tragic incident to spur the organization toward this important next plateau in institutional risk management.

Outdoor programs do not however, always have the luxury of being able to recognize the appropriate time to enhance risk management protocols to include a documented Emergency Response System. Whether adequate resources for a comprehensive system are available or not, beginning to develop a plan is very important.

Developing the Plan

Figuring out what you want your organization's Emergency Response System to do is the first basic step. For SCA, the goal of the system is two fold: first, to tie all the resources available in the field to all the resources of the organization as a whole, and second, to be sure that the organization is aware of any and all issues occurring in the field.

In the field, we have trained and competent field staff running the program, a carefully researched emergency response plan for each Conservation Work Crew or Crew activity, which identifies all the resources available for search and rescue, evacuation and the like, and hopefully, some form of working communications.

Organizationally, SCA has on-call staff serving as Duty Officers, who provide a liaison to staff in the field and are one step removed from the stress of dealing with the ongoing situation. The Duty Officers in turn, represent a base of experience and offer a perspective that represents SCA's entire operations staff and SCA's physician advisor. And finally, the Duty Officer can connect the field personnel with sophisticated communications systems of telephones, faxes, and modems, etc. The system accomplishes the following:

- **Provides logistical support to the field staff involved**. The SCA Crew Leader(s) will often be able to manage the immediate situation, and simply report on the results. On rarer occasions, SCA Duty Officers will need to provide human, logistical, communication or material support to manage the incident. This may include working with the resource management personnel of the site, search and rescue personnel, etc.

- **Provides emotional support to the field staff involved**. The Crew Leader(s) are encouraged to utilize the system for any reason they may need emotional support or reassurance. In simple cases this may be a comforting word on their difficult decision to send home a participant who would have benefited immensely from the program, but was too disruptive to the rest of the group to stay, to managing a rare but occasional disagreement between field staff members on the program, to arranging for the emotional support of the entire group in the face of an incident that led to serious consequences of either a physical or emotional nature.

- **Manages internal communication**. This requires bringing various program staff into the incident communications loop, sometimes including staff at one or more of SCA's six offices, the notification of SCA's Safety Officer or President, and if necessary, the Board of Directors and Legal Counsel.

- **Manages external communication**. This includes next of kin and the media. Most often, incidents will require a student's parent to be contacted to be informed of some minor situation, or the necessity of the student's departure from the program for minor illness, injury or emotional issues (home sickness or discipline). In rarer cases, but in anticipation of such scenarios, this aspect of the system is also designed to manage media interest in the incident at hand.

- **Develops incident documentation**. The Duty Officer is responsible for documenting the incident on SCA's standardized Incident Report Form, acquiring the appropriate incident tracking number required from the program director, and for assuring that the required supporting documentation (SOAP or runners notes, Wilderness Risk Managers Incident Report, etc.) will be sent in from the field.

Two important philosophical threads wind throughout SCA's Emergency Response System. The first is that the system is *not* designed to begin the evaluation of the incident or how it was managed by our field staff. While this assessment and review is a critical piece of SCA's over all risk management plan, this is not the time or place for this activity to commence, and we want the staff reporting in to feel completely supported rather than analyzed. And second, it is SCA's policy that the staff on site have the best knowledge of the situations, and thus should continue to make the decisions impacting the outcome. The ERS is designed to get these folks in the field the resources they need in order to follow through with he successful management of the incident.

In the three years since SCA's comprehensive system replaced a less formal combination of redundant response mechanisms, many additional organizational benefits of the new system became apparent. Here are just a few.

- **Less time required of staff.** With Duty Officer on-call rotating, staff are very much "on" during occasionally intense periods, but can also look forward to times when they are free of call and the responsibilities that go with it. This physical and emotional break helps protect staff from burn-out.

- **A system that utilizes many levels of staff expertise.** Communication protocols provide the resource of experienced or senior program staff as a back up for newer staff who share in the call schedule. When questions occur the Duty Officer has access to a staff member with more experience but the more experienced staff no longer need to take each and every call that comes in.

- **Staff resources are used more efficiently.** In the case of more serious field incidents there is a tendency for the entire program staff and organization to get wrapped up in the minute to minute unfolding of the incident. This is a natural human trait, as folks in our line of business tend to be a very committed, caring sort. But, all other aspects of the organization needs to continue to run efficiently while a crisis in the field is being managed. The Duty Officer protocol clearly outlines who will be contacted, and enables a majority of staff to remain uninvolved in the crisis.

- **Cost reduction.** For SCA, when a uniform system of response was implemented over all program activity, telephone answering services, pagers, cellular telephones and the like were provided for by fewer vendors, and used much more efficiently by staff. This has resulted in less cost and fewer types of technology.

Tools for Implementing the Plan

There are four critical tools for implementing an organizational Emergency Response Plan; the written plan, the assisting technology, staff training on the plan and technology, and the formal evaluation of the field incidents and the plan's strengths and limitations in managing incidents in the field.

Written Plan

The first, and most obvious, is the written plan itself. At SCA, this document is the *SCA Duty Officer Handbook.* This covers the various protocols for managing and documenting incidents called into SCA from the field. Among the subjects covered are:

- **Glossary.** This provides a definition of common terms.
- **Internal communication protocols.** This includes the various defined thresholds of events which require communications from the field to on-call Duty Officers, from Duty Officers to senior Program Staff, from Program Staff to the Safety Officer, and from the Safety Officer to the President, designated media spokesperson, Board and Legal Counsel.
- **Incident documentation protocols.** This includes the documentation forms.
- **Detailed description of system operations.** This includes the technological user's guides and instructions.
- **External communication protocols.** This includes contacting next of kin, and working with the media (media worksheet included).
- **Residential contact information**. This resource includes staff, Legal Counsel and Board of Directors home telephone numbers.

Technology

The second set of tools are in the technological realm. Now, there are very strong opinions in this industry about the utility, dependability and philosophical appropriateness of the latest communications gismos currently available. Each organization needs to thoroughly evaluate both the needs and philosophy of their programs. At SCA, we have adapted the following:

- **Crew Leaders in the field** in backcountry situations utilize Motorola King radios tied into the communications systems of our hosting resource management agency (NPS, USFS, BLM, etc.). Front country programs use cellular telephones (neither staff or participants are permitted to have personal cellular telephones on SCA programs).
- **SCA field staff serving on-call as Duty Officers** have numeric pagers and cellular telephones. Additionally, a service provided by StarTouch International

called ESA (electronic secretarial administrator) provides each staff member with a personal voice mail box with 800 (or 888) number service. ESA allows multiple programming features such as the ability to route a call received at the individual 800 number through up to four different telephone numbers, voice mail, the ability to conference up to 8 callers into the same call, broadcast faxes, etc.

- **Any one needing assistance from SCA** calls a national 800 number for immediate connection to SCA's Emergency Response System. Because we manage this number through the ESA system, during non-business hours, this single number is programmed to automatically contact the on-call Duty Officer at which ever actual telephone (home phone, hotel phone, cell phone, pager, etc.) they choose to have ring.

Training

The third tool is thorough training on the system, protocols and technology provided to field staff throughout SCA. Crew Leaders are fully oriented to how the system works, and SCA's expectations of the communications we require from them. Duty Officers are oriented on an annual basis to the systems, protocols and the use of the technology, and additionally have a StarTouch technical representative available for programming questions and/or trouble shooting the systems. There is also an overall orientation for SCA staff working out of the SCA national headquarters office in Charlestown, NH, the location where the ESA system rings during business hours.

Evaluation

The final tool, is a system wide evaluation conducted on an annual basis by program and administrative staff. Obviously, all of the tools listed above will need to be tweaked, amended or changed based on the results of a thorough evaluation.

Creating an ERS with Limited Resources

If you are working with limited resources, and trying to figure out where to start, consider this -- don't move forward piece by piece. Think big enough to make a plan, recognizing that implementation of the plan may be a multiphase operation. Once the plan is made, then prioritize the implementation.

For SCA, the driving force in developing our ERS was based on our recognition that we were not organized or sophisticated enough to deal with the implications of mismanaging potential media involvement in an SCA field incident. As we all know, how the media reports a serious incident or fatality can be the single event that sinks a non-profit. We continued to rely on less formal on-call schedules and low levels of technology for several years after the original system was designed. In tackling the media piece first, we also worked through appropriate routes of both internal and external communications. This pointed out the logic and necessity of actually changing some staff position descriptions

and realigning responsibilities that had been assigned based on personal interests or experience rather than structural common sense.

Another place to look if you can really only move forward in one or two areas is to standardize internal communication. Your organization does not need to be very large for this to be an issue! With the development of all of SCA's protocols and thresholds for communication not with standing, the largest improvement in internal communication was a standardized documentation of actual incidents. Not only did this vastly improve internal staff communication, but it also allowed participation in the Wilderness Risk Manager's Incident Reporting System.

Finally, if ever there was an area to avoid jumping into too soon, it is technology. In our fast paced society, there is this tendency to lean toward technology first to solve communications challenges. SCA built a system that worked without the conveniences and added advantages of the bells and whistles -- we figured out everything else first, and layered in the technology last. At this point even as we assess the first season using new technology, if we find that there are things that are not working, it will be that it was technology was too simple or too complex to meet the system needs. The system was sound and has changed very little since its initial re-development.

A Final Word

Each of us needs to recognize that even with the continuing growth and sophistication of assessing and managing risk in the outdoor arena, there are percentages that come into play. The reality is that, despite all of our efforts, crisis in the field will occur. An organization that has put considerable effort into every ounce of prevention possible still owes it to the program's participants, staff and Board of Directors to have a carefully considered and documented plan of action at the ready to deal effectively with the worst case scenarios that none of us like to spend to much time considering. By planning for such events, many programs, as SCA did, will soon discover that the ERS methodologies will also be a resource to provide other valuable program support and organizational benefit. And like that life insurance policy that we are all loathe to purchase, it is never the less good to know that it is there when you need it.

About the author:

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