

Core Competencies by Jim Wades K8SIW

Ask any U. S. Marine and he will be pleased to remind you a Marine is "a rifleman first." The Marines, like any elite organization understand the importance of core competencies.

In recent years, there has been a trend in Amateur Radio emcomm groups to move away from core competencies. Walk into many ARES or RACES meetings, and one can find a wide variety of training taking place on almost any emergency planning subject....except communications. It seems many such organizations have replaced being "a communicator first" with "being an emergency management volunteer first."

Since the WTC attack, many in the Amateur Radio Service have rightfully identified the fact that most of today's radio amateurs are woefully unprepared to provide competent service in time of emergency. The embarrassing performance of many operators during the early days of Hurricane Katrina further reinforce the need for better training. As a result, many ARRL Sections have sought to implement training requirements for rank-and-file members

Many of the training standards being implemented throughout the U. S. simply increase the workload for individual members while doing nothing to insure they can actually communicate. The fact is, training on NIMS (National Incident Management System), "e-team," hazardous materials, terrorism and similar topics should be considered value-added knowledge.

The ability to conduct an organized efficient net, transmit and receive third-party traffic, administer and track communications content, and quickly and tepidly deploy portable equipment are the core competencies. These skills should be developed FIRST, before the value-added skills.

Unfortunately, far too many amateurs seem to assume communications skills magically appear as soon as an FCC license arrives in the mail. Others reject such skills outright, by avoiding any activities associated with standardized communications methods, such as NTS.

Who works for whom?

When Western Union sent telegrams, no one walked into a W. U. office and questioned the protocols and methods utilized to transmit the message. The routes through the nearest reperforator offices or the functioning of a varioplex system were invisible to the end-user. One's only concern was the assurance that the message would arrive intact and in a timely fashion. The same is true today when the average cell-phone or Internet customer presses "send" to place a call or transmit a message.

All too often, Amateur Radio leadership officials fail to understand they are an independent service and begin to perceive themselves as emergency management employees. Unfortunately, this is sometimes driven by the ego boost a few feel when they are invited to planning meetings and issued official ID cards and the like.

While a productive and cooperative working relationship with local emergency management is important, we should not lose sight of the fact that we are closer in structure to a non-governmental organization (NGO). An excellent example of the desired relations is that which is typical of the America Red Cross. An ARC representative may be present at the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The ARC may have full responsibility for the important mass care function under the county emergency action guidelines (emergency plan), yet the ARC ultimately operates under a separate charter, with separate funding, and independent auditing and oversight.

When an emergency manager begins dictating specific procedures, technical requirements, and communications methods to be used by an ARES or RACES group, this should raise a red flag for everyone. Such behaviors may indicate that boundaries are blurred to the point where a conflict of interest can arise.

Radio amateurs are also reminded that a properly managed emcomm group will serve multiple clients active in emergency response. In the case of ARES, the ARRL maintains a variety of national memorandums of understanding (MOUs), all of which may bind a local program to a variety of obligations. Therefore, beware of giving the false impression that we serve only one official or one agency.

Communicators First!

Most importantly, we should insure that we are communicators first. If your local, ARRL section, a served agency, or similar leadership officials are implementing training standards that fail to first concentrate on the core competencies of establishing communications in the field and handling traffic, they are shirking their responsibility.

There is a reason the U.S. Marines are one of the finest fighting forces on the earth. They remain true to their core competency as riflemen. Perhaps we can learn something from them:

Amateur Radio: Communicators First: Semper Fi!

Jim Wades has changed his callsign to K8SIW. You may contact him via postal mail to Jim Wades, P. O. Box 457, Allegan, MI, 49010. His e-mail address is wb8siw@charter.net.