

Competence in Emergency Management

Max Dubois December 2002

Summary

Competency standards are here to stay and as personnel development practices evolve there's no doubt that UK PLC will be driven by competency management systems of one form or another. Competency standards come in a number of flavours and continue to be developed by a diverse range of organisations from the Institute of Directors to the National Pest Control Association with various approaches to knowledge and skills acquisition, application and assessment. There are literally hundreds of institutions, associations and government standard setting bodies dedicated to providing organisations with the following benefitsⁱ:

- ▶ A systematic approach to training;
- ▶ A framework that is monitored and controlled;
- ▶ Qualifications that are recognised and valued by employers;
- ▶ Better planning, both for the candidate's development and that of the organisation

With the obvious impetus of recent events, emergency management is in a new and critical stage of evolution. The Police and Fire Services have recognised that multiple level, group wide competency standards represent best practice and are both in the process of developing systems to reflect changes in legislation, culture and not least operational (emergent) best practicesⁱⁱ.

Increased terrorism, public awareness and corporate governance are changing the operational environment and industry may need to follow the emergency services lead. If this is the case, we need to ensure that standards applicable to any aspect of industrial sector emergency management are able to meet the needs of the individual responder, the operator and the regulator for and on behalf of

the entire stakeholder mix, not only now but for generations to come. Failure to do this could have dire results for the social, natural and built environments not to mention regional and national economies. The New York experience is a recent and stark reminder of the fact that in an emergency the first response counts and redressing poor decisions kills the most important part of an emergency management organisation, those at the sharp end!

With this in mind it is my belief that there is a long way to go until the UK industrial sector has developed a realistic range of operational on and off-site emergency management competency standards and whilst I would very much like the opportunity to discuss the entire gambit of emergency management competency issues, I think there are many areas for strategic consensus, the purpose of this article is to pose two strategic questions:

- ▶ Who should set the standards?
- ▶ What should the framework approach be?

Who should set the standards?

Industrial operations require a range of physical and intellectual component parts. The knowledge and skills required to manage these components is derived from people performing various 'mainstream' functions, for example managers, engineers, and administrators. A critical success factor in operations is the ability of the people employed to perform activities within an occupation category to the standard expected in employmentⁱⁱⁱ in other words they must be competent.

In order to gain competence and prove it to employers, most professionals become members of a chartered or industry recognised institute or association. The majority of these institutions use competency standards to ensure individual candidates may acquire, apply and demonstrate occupational

knowledge and skills in a logical progressive order to gain institutional accreditation and professional status in the form of 'records of achievement' through a mixture of academic, vocational and non-vocational initiatives commonly termed Continual Professional Development (CPD)^{iv}. Most UK operators require evidence of these records of achievement for recruitment of staff, their continual development and of course for promotion or otherwise.

Operators of major accident hazard sites must demonstrate to regulatory bodies the competency of those delegated a function within the on-site and /or off-site emergency arrangements. This leads to four fundamental issues:

- ▶ Mainstream institutional competency standards do not generally include emergency management elements;
- ▶ Operators tend not to have formal emergency management competency standards;
- ▶ The Health & Safety Executive tend toward descriptive rather than prescriptive requirements;
- ▶ Response teams on industrial sites generally comprise volunteers expected to work in none-dedicated teams, with unusual tasking under unusual conditions.

If one accepts that emergency management rarely exists within professional institutional competency standards it may be argued that emergency management competency standards in industry must therefore follow one of three fundamental options:

- ▶ Standards should be specific to the organisation and implemented independent of mainstream institutional competencies;
- ▶ Emergency management should become an intrinsic part of professional institutional competency standards;
- ▶ An institution should be selected by representatives of major accident hazard sites and regulatory bodies, which will develop competency standards capable of

satisfying the needs of the individual, the operating organisation and the regulatory body.

What should the framework approach be?

A common trait of competency standards is that they are directly linked to the management structure of the organisation. There are basically three means of achieving this:

Generic activities, multiple levels, CPD acquisition;

The UK National Occupational Standards for Management administered for the Government by the Management Standards Centre are designed to address the key roles of five levels of management from new start to strategic manager^v. This approach is based on the proposition that eight categories of management activity are found at all management levels and the knowledge and skills to perform these activities are organised accordingly^{vi}. A derivative of this approach can be found within the Offshore Petroleum Industry Training Organisation (OPITO) Occupational Standards for Managers of Offshore Installations^{vii}. These standards have five management activity categories; including the category 'manage safety', which contains the element controlling emergencies.

Tiered structure, step changes in competency;

The Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) has a three-tiered system of support, practitioner and advanced practitioner, providing step changes in competency within a CPD framework, attained by vocational and none-vocational initiatives through what are described as certificate and professional level programmes. The CIPD approach in many respects resembles the United States Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Incident Command System (ICS) National Training Curriculum, which identifies three levels of

management candidate, basic, intermediate and advanced. These levels are acquired through a series of seventeen modular courses. Candidates must progress through the courses in a logical order.

Multiple roles; multiple activities, step change and CPD acquisition;

The Emergency Fire Service Integrated Personnel Development System uses role maps of every function within the organisation to ensure that each member of the service at every level knows exactly what is expected of them and to provide and measure the knowledge and skills required in a formally structured CPD environment^{viii}. In some respects, this resembles the commercial aviation industry's Crew Resource Management (CRM) approach, which is aimed at "human factors knowledge, and skills that contribute to optimal individual and crew performance whilst on duty"^{ix} and encourages problem solving outside of the procedural envelope.

Industrial emergency management organisations tend to use a tiered structure of three fundamental levels; operational, tactical and strategic. This is a classic organisational model for emergency management used by the UK emergency services based on operational levels working at the sharp-end dealing with direct response. The tactical level supports operational activities and focuses on on-site and off-site issues and the strategic level supports tactical activities and focuses on business issues. Operational teams tend to comprise shift managers, technicians and security guards, tactical teams tend to comprise project managers and engineers and strategic teams tend to comprise business unit leaders and senior management. Tactical and strategic teams also have administration level functions in support.

In effect this three tier structure with multiple functions carrying out multiple roles and responsibilities offers two basic framework options to be considered:

- 1 Continual Professional Development for all functions in the organisation this approach is extremely difficult to develop and implement across an organisation requiring such a diverse range of competencies, which are usually perceived as part time features of the operation. The time, cost and quality overheads are significant;
- 2 Step changes through a range of modular courses. This option allows organisations to tailor courses to each level from familiarisation to Business Unit Leader in the form of induction, support, member and leader.

Conclusion

If an organisation does not have a consistent emergency management system that is implemented across the entire span of its operations, it will not realise the benefits of competency standards and any emergency management initiatives will be *ad hoc* with knowledge and skills acquired needing to be re-learned each time an employee changes location. This is a common and unnecessary overhead in terms of operator time and cost and individual intellectual effort. Achieving a consistent system is the route of quality emergency management competency systems; Dr Eric Auf der Hiede articulated this perfectly when he said that: " Disaster Planning is an illusion unless it is based on valid assumptions about human behaviour; incorporates an inter-organisational perspective, is tied to resources and is known and accepted by the participants"^x.

For the record, having had the privilege of developing and implementing a number of different approaches to emergency management competency, it is my opinion that operators should develop their own emergency management competency standards within a framework of progressive modular courses which address the needs of inductees, support staff, response team members and leaders. The standards should be based on a comprehensive emergency management system devised from an integrated benchmark standard provided by a body of regulator and

industry representatives that satisfies the needs of the stakeholder mix, and incidentally I know this can be achieved!

About the author, Max Dubois has recently joined the OCTO team as a principle consultant; prior to this he was head of education for the United Nations Division of Emergency Management based in the Balkans. If anybody wishes to continue the debate or would like further information about any other aspect of emergency management please contact Max by e-mail at max.dubois@octo.uk.com or by telephone on 01244405270.

i UK National Occupational Standards for Management, the Management Standards Centre 2002

ii Police Skills & Standards Organisation, Sector Workforce Development Plan 2002 and The Chief & Assistant Chief Fire Officers Association, Standards Development Group, Integrated Personnel Development System 2002

iii Adapted from the Institution of Engineers, Australia 1998

iv The Chartered Institute of Personnel Development

v For further details see www.management-standards.org

vi UK National Occupational Standards for Management, the Management Standards Centre 2002

vii OPITO Approved Standard OIM Controlling Emergencies Rev 1 01/07/01

viii The Chief & Assistant Chief Fire Officers Association, Standards Development Group, Integrated Personnel Development System 2002

ix Royal Aeronautical Society Guide to Performance Standards for Instructors of Crew Resource Management Training in Commercial Aviation 1998

x Dr Erik Auf der Hiede Disaster Response; principles of preparation and coordination, 1989