

When Will We Ever Learn? Safety Lessons from Hurricane Katrina

It seems fitting to end the year with some reflections on this past hurricane season. Why? First, we just witnessed the most severe environmental devastation and human suffering the U.S. has ever endured from a series of hurricanes. Since last June, vivid images of the negative effects of successive hurricanes have been depicted daily on television screens nationwide. Most notable was Hurricane Katrina, because so much of the destructive aftermath from that hurricane could have been prevented.

What did we learn from this catastrophic event? Did our direct or vicarious connections with the devastation and human tragedy teach us anything? Here are six lessons of human nature related to both Hurricane Katrina and industrial health and safety.

Lesson 1. Accidents Happen

For more than two decades I've advocated cautious use of the word "accident" – a term which implies chance or lack of personal control. Most injuries are caused by manageable factors, but some do involve unknown or uncontrollable determinants. Hurricanes exemplify the latter. We can prepare to avoid the negative consequence of a hurricane with protective devices or escape plans, but we can't stop or re-direct a hurricane.

Similarly, it's important to own up to the fact we don't know enough yet to prevent all unintentional injuries. Accidents still happen in the workplace, in the home, and on the road. Like hurricanes, these are the unpreventable mishaps that require protective barriers and emergency escape plans. When people believe unpreventable and dangerous incidents are possible, they are more likely to engage in emergency planning.

Lesson 2. Envision and Communicate Tragic Consequences

I've heard many safety pros say, "What we need around here is a fatality to get management support for safety." Of course, no one really wants such misfortune. But a tragedy does focus people's attention on the actions needed to prevent a recurrence. Indeed, television images of environmental destruction and human suffering after Hurricane Katrina motivated quality responsiveness to Rita and Wilma by local, state, and federal agencies.

How long will the motivating images of Hurricane Katrina's wrath last? Will people eventually forget the devastating consequences of failing to prepare for an infrequent but inevitable accident? Will a preparedness mindset ultimately return to "business as usual," as well as defensive denial supported by self-talk like "it won't happen to me"?

Yes, for those not directly impacted by the hurricanes of 2005, these images will likely fade with time, along with the proactive and protective behaviors motivated by such visualization. Fortunately these images can be revived, and the relevant safety behaviors revisited and activated. **How? Through interpersonal communication we can remind people of the ruinous consequences that resulted from the lack of planning and protective preparation for Hurricane Katrina. These dreadful consequences were much more than financial.**

Lesson 3. Invest in People

"What is the return-on-investment or ROI? And, how long will it take to see results?" These are the two questions asked most frequently by managers considering the

implementation of a particular safety program. They want to know how much the process will cost and how long it will take before financial advantages are realized.

We're told it would have cost about \$2.5 billion to renovate the Lake Pontchartrain levees so they could protect New Orleans from flooding after a Category 4 or 5 hurricane. That cost is certainly mind-boggling, which is probably why the levees were not up-graded. The chance a Category 4 hurricane would hit New Orleans seemed remote, so the city reaped soon, certain, and positive consequences by investing in other structures or business ventures. Because safety was not a priority (let alone a value), the cost of re-building New Orleans will amount to more than \$200 billion. These financial estimates result in an overwhelming cost-benefit ratio in favor of investing in levee improvement. Of course, hindsight is 20/20.

Although the financial costs of Hurricane Katrina's destruction was astronomical, the total cost cannot be tallied in dollars. We can't put a price tag on the human pain, suffering, and deaths caused by the flooding of New Orleans. We saw horrific scenes of people stranded on streets, on roof tops, and in the Superdome. We heard numerous reports of people drowning because they couldn't escape the flood waters. Emergency crews and life-supports were unavailable, delayed, or misdirected.

Bottom line: The aversive consequences from the lack of proactive protection and emergency planning for Hurricane Katrina put a critical spin on the investment term – "ROI". Intervention for safety is an investment in people, and the ROI is far more than financial savings or business profits.

Lesson 4. Frustration and Pain Elicits Aggression

Besides human distress and misery, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina included substantial aggression. Electronic and print media nationwide exposed the public to outspoken anger, rampant looting, and interpersonal assaults among those trapped in New Orleans. Were these people criminals or hoodlums with no regard for others?

Research with many varieties of animals, including humans, has shown that frustration and pain causes aggressive behavior. Thus, much of the outrage and hurtful encounters observed after Hurricane Katrina were due to circumstances, not character flaws.

Is this lesson relevant for everyday work situations? Obviously, the workplace does not harbor the amount and severity of pain and frustration linked to Hurricane Katrina. However, as the result of emotional upheavals, frustrations, or disappointments at home or at work, individual workers can be in psychological states approximating those of the hurricane victims. I suggest you raise this possibility in group meetings, and discuss workplace situations that cause employees to feel frustrated. By removing frustrating conditions, you decrease anger and interpersonal conflict conducive to risky behavior and unintentional injury.

Lesson 5. Own-Up and Apologize

In my *ISHN* column last May, I discussed qualities of leaders defined by Jim Collins in his research-based book, “Good to Great.” Humbly admitting mistakes and apologizing headed this list. These virtues were not displayed by the local, state, and federal politicians queried about Katrina effects. For example, the mayor of New Orleans

blamed the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), while the head of FEMA passed the buck to the mayor and the governor of Louisiana.

The eventual apologies and acceptance of responsibility by leadership for the lack of timely and competent responsiveness to the aftermath of this catastrophe were generally perceived as too little, too late, and insincere. Moreover, the nation saw little emotional empathy for the disastrous consequences of delayed and incompetent attention to public safety and health. Have I missed something? Perhaps competent leaders do not show emotion.

I've heard safety consultants assert effective leaders are "emotionally resilient" and exhibit little emotion. Although many in charge of helping the victims of Hurricane Katrina seemed to fit this description, I know of no research supporting this prescription. Rather, my experience suggests the opposite. I'm convinced the best leaders feel true empathy for victims and thus cannot help but show some emotion. And when people see emotional reaction from their leaders, they believe their leaders are empathic and genuinely care.

Lesson 6. Many Actively Care

The media coverage of Hurricane Katrina's effects was not all negative. Envision the varied and extensive helping hands reaching out to hurricane victims. Many traveled hundreds of miles to actively care, and many more sent financial support. My research students, for example, contributed over \$500 to purchase baby food for needy families in New Orleans. Wal-Mart sold us the food for half price.

Readers have their own success stories of people showing empathic concern for those victimized by the hurricanes of 2005. Collect personal stories and relive these

testimonies of people going beyond the call of duty to assist others. People will actively care when given appropriate direction. When this direction is given by modest leaders who own-up to their own human weakness and make an emotional appeal for help, even more will actively care.

In Conclusion

Safety leaders should help ensure the public never forgets the calamitous destruction and human misery that occurred because appropriate preventive action had not been taken in New Orleans. With billions of dollars, New Orleans may be rebuilt and protected with the proper levee system, but the money can't bring back the hundreds of lives lost nor restore the historic structures, memorable possessions, and priceless keepsakes washed away by flood waters. May we never let people forget that most of these losses could have been prevented with the types of proactive plans and activities advocated daily by safety leaders. And, may we find consolation and encouragement in the observation that many people actively cared for those victimized by the hurricanes of 2005.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide understand and apply these lessons, which come from People-Based Safety (PBS). Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has recently published Dr. Geller's new book on PBS, as well as five video/CD/DVD programs, accompanied by workbooks and leader guides. For more information, please log on to www.people-based-safety.com or call SPS at 540-951-7233.