Emergency management: A moral compass

Increasingly complex global vulnerabilities and social responsibility are being felt at local levels. This is leading to a paradigm shift in and around emergency management, says **Beverley Griffiths**, in this call for a code of ethics and conduct

The present challenges are breeding grounds for ethical uncertainty and dilemma, causing tensions and distress, with severe consequences to society. The complexities of hazards and risks associated with societies' vulnerabilities are increasing. These are being felt globally at the local level where policy, decisions, plans and response affect individuals daily. There has always been a need for ethical decision-making within emergency management (EM), but it has yet to be taken seriously as part of its policies, guidance and practice.

In the field's journey to become a recognised profession, a code of ethics and conduct is required. Questions such as, 'what is needed, and are these things different, or one and the same?' led to research about what the components of an ethical code of conduct for EM should look like.

Although there are supportive bodies for professionals, they only have codes for members; written for them and focusing solely on their behaviours and career development. However, support is limited by resource availability, time and finances.

Many EM practitioners were interviewed for the research. They agreed that there was a need for a living framework that supported practitioners in their professional career journey and in their roles and responsibilities. Several participants identified previous emergencies or enquiries where, had there been more thought, support and resources, a lack of competence, leadership and integrity, or poor decision-making could have been avoided. This added to the moral distress that these situations caused for practitioners and the community in a crisis.

A golden thread

The sentiment of doing the best in the worst of times came through like a golden thread.

Findings identified the need for stewardship of care towards the community, like many of the other recognised professional bodies that have responsibility for lives and livelihood. Challenges, choices and decisions in all phases of EM were identified as hampering it, through a lack of resources, restrictive practices, or being focus driven by ill-informed decisions and thereby having consequences for individuals. In emergencies, these may go far beyond usual practices and personal ethics.

Simply having a code of ethics and conduct is not enough, it needs embedding into the everyday business of EM. The community needs to have the confidence to trust emergency managers to act ethically in its best interests. There must be support through a living, learning code of ethics, which has dedicated resources and constant support for practitioners to utilise, challenge, report and learn from. The research found that many had a moral compass. Conversely, many had not, leading to issues in planning and response that could cause further moral distress. Some professionals felt strong and competent enough to challenge, while others didn't, even in the knowledge that their inactivity would have consequences.

It is time to check our moral compasses and look to a map for directions in the EM field. In further articles, ethical theories and components of a code, as well as its management and support will be discussed.　**C**RJ

■ *For more information, visit wlv.ac.uk/emrc*

Fresh Idea | Adobe Stock

Author

BEVERLEY GRIFFITHS *is a Senior Lecturer in Emergency Planning at the UK's University of Wolverhampton, a* CRJ *Key Network Partner, and she is a Member of the* CRJ's *Advisory Panel*