

Battle Rhythm in emergency management

Fred Wilson suggests that the concept of Battle Rhythm scheduling will lead to greater productivity and coordination among emergency management agencies.

ABSTRACT

Often, the senior or lead entity managing an emergency engages in an ad hoc approach to scheduling conferences and setting deadlines for the submission of reports. This can lead to the people actually having to provide the core data facing unreasonable timescales. Battle Rhythm is a military term that directs the establishment of an orchestrated and holistic timetable of current and future events. The use of the concept in emergency management will lead to greater productivity and ensure co-ordination among all the agencies involved in an emergency.

Introduction

No it is not a new dance craze. Battle rhythm is the military name for the maintenance of an ordered routine. As defined by the US Department of Defence it is "A deliberate daily cycle of command, staff, and unit activities intended to synchronize current and future operations." (DOD Dictionary¹)

To some extent we have our own individualised battle rhythm – the time at which we get up, shower, have breakfast, and transport ourselves to work to meet a designated start time has a fairly standardised approach. If we need to prepare for an early meeting or adapt to a change in transportation arrangements, the routine is adjusted to meet these and other emerging influences as the day progresses.

The organisation we work for usually has a scheduled approach to its business activities with board meetings, meal breaks and a number of other activities occurring at regular times. That allows the inputs to those activities and their relationship to external events, customer/supplier needs and other influences to be co-ordinated. If the organisation is geographically spread, and particularly if different time zones are involved, there is an additional co-ordination dimension to ensure that the battle rhythm of the individual parts of the organisation are harmonised.

Emergency management needs a rhythm. Each new emergency is not exactly like the last one and the challenge is to have a structure that can develop the battle rhythm required for the current emergency. Many factors can remain static – and the more that remain static the better – so that emergency management staff are familiar with a basic rhythm or standard routine that incorporates enduring practices, e.g. the Regional Controllers video-link or conference call is always at, say, 1100.

This paper examines some principles for establishing a battle rhythm for your organisation, before the emergency arises.

Background

The concept of developing and maintaining a strictly scheduled approach is not new in the military. Sun Tzu wrote of the need for consistency and constancy to promote discipline in the 6th Century B.C., the Roman Army maintained an inflexible routine, and standard timetables of unit activities remain pervasive in today's military. However, as warfare has become more spatially disparate across time zones, the development of integrated and synchronised planning, execution, assessment and review models has become more relevant.

The media, particularly the electronic media, must carry out a rhythmic activity to gather and present the news within strict deadlines, and their processes often involve recognition of time differences. In businesses such as the fast moving consumer goods industry, the lack of a holistic approach to integrated timing in the purchase/packing/distribution continuum can have devastating economic results.

What all these examples have in common is the recognition that if the leader or senior management delays their decision-making processes and subordinates also do so on down the chain, the impact at the lowest level can be catastrophic. The unit that must action the plan or activity is left with no time to adequately prepare. The consequences of that over time is a loss of confidence in the leader's ability, a less than optimum outcome, and a decline in morale.

¹ Department of Defence Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms – Joint Publication 1-02 accessed from www.js.pentagon.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/natoterm_index.html 25 May 2009.

The concept of battle rhythm is not a US-orchestrated fad either. The principle, if not the name, is used widely such as in a recent UK national exercise, Winter Willow 2, conducted by the Department of Health involving 5,000 players, where an exercise battle rhythm was used to co-ordinate local, regional and national activities. Somewhat presciently, the scenario for the exercise was an influenza pandemic that had spread to the UK.

What does this mean for emergency management?

The response from some Emergency Managers may well be that "I knew that". They are confident that they have a schedule for the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) that recognises the planning cycle², shift changes, meal breaks, etc. But what is missing in most jurisdictions is the recognition of the need for a battle rhythm that embraces all the entities involved in an emergency response. Consistently there is the imposition of changing deadlines for reporting data, unrealistic timescales for responding to draft new initiatives, and variable and arbitrary times for video and telephone conference calls. Many of these occur because a senior individual has not recognised that their time is only as important as their subordinate's time. Equally they do not practice preciseness themselves (while expecting it of others) and allow meetings and conferences to go over their allotted time because they permit a lack of focus to develop.

The promulgation of a battle rhythm is a key component of effective time management during an emergency. Not only does it shape the behaviour of leaders and senior management personnel, it provides the framework for consistency that individuals crave for and respond best to. It allows personnel at every level to understand the objectives for their shift and enhances unity of effort. Emergency responses can be likened to military operations and time-sensitive business activities. They achieve their goals in an optimum fashion if there is discipline, top-down and bottom-up, and a battle rhythm can promote that achievement.

How to design a Battle Rhythm

The responsibility for setting the high level parameters of a battle rhythm rests with the Lead Agency at whatever strategic level the emergency response is being conducted at, i.e. a national emergency by the national entity, a localised emergency by the regional or local entity of the Lead Agency.

Supporting agencies will have their own subordinate battle rhythm that is aligned with that of the Lead Agency and the deadlines that it sets. Lead Agencies therefore need to:

- establish the overarching battle rhythm as early as possible
- minimise the number of events in it to allow flexibility to supporting agencies

- consult with supporting agencies to ensure key deadlines can be met
- develop internal battle rhythm schedules that mesh with the strategic battle rhythm

It will usually be helpful for the Lead Agency to promulgate when shift changes are scheduled in the co-ordinating Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) in their battle rhythm. This alerts supporting agencies to the times when the Lead Agency will be less responsive to incoming calls. It also allows the planning cycle² to be interrelated and responsive.

The Lead Agency also needs to be aware of likely external pressures and deadlines, e.g. media deadlines and Ministerial deadlines, as these can impact on when planning cycles need to occur to ensure the appropriate information is available at the optimum time.

Detailed process

Designing a battle rhythm is an iterative process in establishing the most balanced and responsive structure. Personnel with the right skills and resources can use tools such as Microsoft Project and SmartDraw that automatically provide dependency links, but often a spreadsheet approach will work just as well.

Start with a weekly schedule that contains only strategic output activities. Weekend demands and resource availability will often be different, but as far as possible make the key events, e.g. Controller's meetings, media briefings and Sitrep issue times at the same time every day.

Then set the duration of activities. Limit co-ordination activities such as conference calls to no more than 30 minutes and be very strict in their observance – everyone will have experienced how a desultory meeting under poor chairmanship takes forever and disrupts downstream activities.

Then set the deadlines for when subordinate and supporting entities need to provide their inputs for consolidation into the key events. This time must be minimal and realistic – demanding key data from subordinates and supporters to allow leisurely consideration and collation at the co-ordinating EOC is counter-productive. Not only does it alienate the suppliers of the data, it also devalues the currency of the data as the most up-to-date information is not included.

Now overlay the shift roster and review the result to check for inconsistencies, conflicts and insufficient time allowed between sequential activities. There is little point for example in having the end of the Controller's meeting coinciding with the deadline for Incident Action Plan inputs, as the information from that meeting will not be incorporated into that planning cycle.

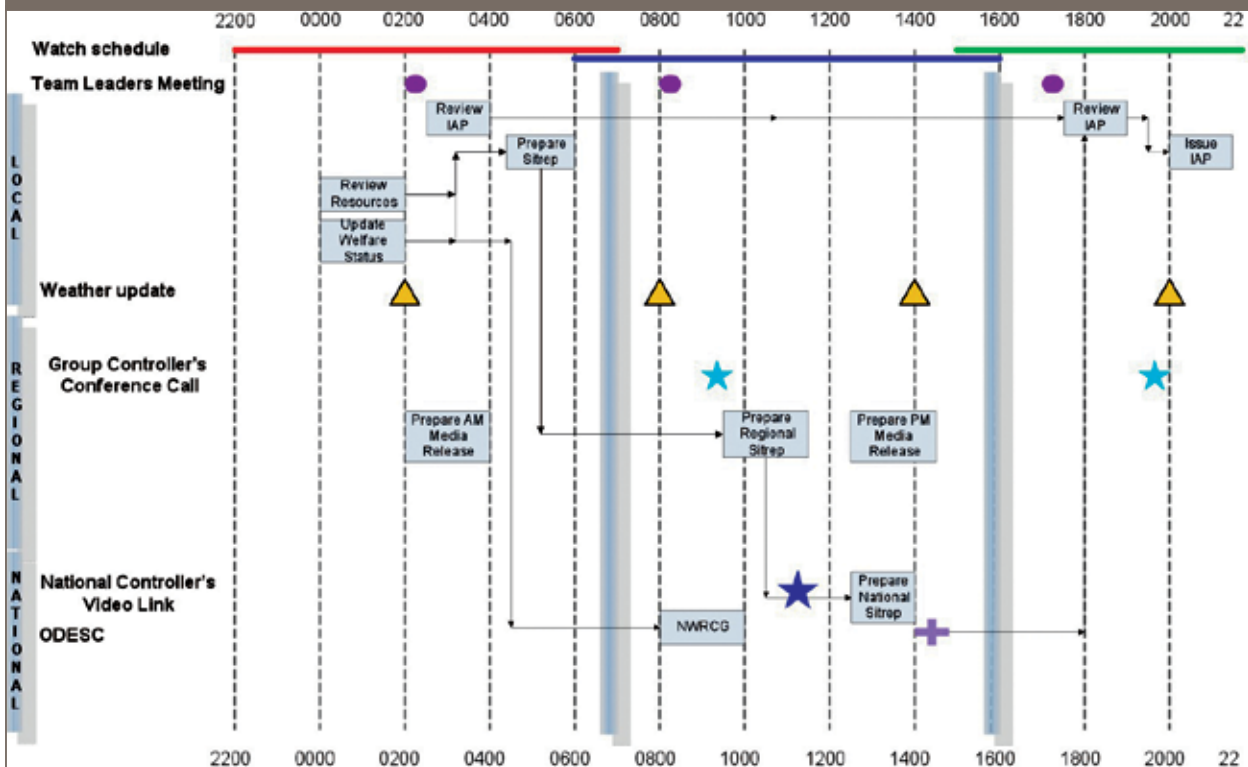
From the weekly schedule a more detailed daily schedule can be developed, both at the strategic and operational levels and by subordinate and supporting entities.

² In its simplest form the planning cycle is the continuous process of Plan-Execute-Evaluate-Review. There are many terminological differences and varying degrees of sophistication in planning cycle models developed by different authors. See for example <http://images.google.com/images?q=planning%20cycle&hl=en&rls=com.microsoft:en-nz:IE-Address&rlz=117GGLR&um=1&ie=UTF-8&sa=N&tab=wi>

Shown below is a portion of a simple battle rhythm on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet which is easily modified, easily promulgated and easily printed out in hard copy.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
1					Strategic Level			Operational Level		
2	Time	Shift			Meetings	Activities	Outputs	Meetings	Activities	Outputs
3								Team Leaders		
4	0300								Review IAP	
5										
6	0400									
7										
8	0500								Prepare AM Sitrep	Forward AM Sitrep
9										Issue map revision
10	0600					Media briefing			Weather update	
11									Shift handover	
12	0700					Shift handover				
13						Prepare AM Sitrep				Welfare status report
14	0800							Team Leaders		
15					Conference call		Issue AM Sitrep			
16	0900								Draft IAP	
17								Welfare stakeholders		
18	1000									Issue IAP
19					Brief Minister					

Below is another style of a battle rhythm using a Visio presentation.



More sophisticated approaches have been used such as that by the Indiana Department of Homeland Security using the emergency management software WebEOC, where a webpage provides a countdown, automatic colour changes occur as an event approaches, and tone alerts sound at event start times.

It is not important how classy your battle rhythm is or how it is structured, but that you adopt the approach of a structured and co-ordinated management process that informs and guides the personnel involved, and is integrated and sympathetic with the management

needs of other stakeholders. If you are a Lead Agency or the co-ordinating centre for subordinate or supporting agencies, then the need is even greater.

About the author

Fred Wilson, after a career in the Royal New Zealand Navy, was the Emergency Manager for Auckland City Council for five years and was also appointed as the first Group Controller for the Auckland Region CDEM Group. He retired from that role in 2005 and now provides consultancy services in the risk and emergency management fields. He may be contacted at kf.wilson@xtra.co.nz