

A CONVERSATION WITH SHAWNA BRUCE Crisis Communication and Public Information Officer Instructor

As part of IAEM-Canada's mission to advance the emergency management profession, the EM Profiles Series aims to illustrate the breadth of experiences of emergency management professionals across Canada, share knowledge and insights into the field, and promote continued professional development.

In our second profile, Shawna Bruce discusses the importance of effective training for public information officers and the critical role crisis communications has during a major event.

SHAWNA BRUCE was an Army Public Affairs Officer for 25 years before transitioning into the role of national Public Affairs Manager for Dow Chemical Canada. Today, Shawna is a part-time instructor in NAIT's Disaster and Emergency program and supported the CADEM IMT Academy as the co-instructor for the FEMA All-Hazards PIO course. Shawna is the public member of the Board of Directors for NR CAER and recently established [M.D. Bruce and Associates Ltd.](#) where she shares her passion for crisis communication with clients.

Shawna has a Master of Arts in Disaster and Emergency Management from Royal Roads University (2017); is a graduate of the Defense Information School (USA – 2001); Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication (Carleton University 1988); and a Public Relations diploma from Algonquin College (1988).

Shawna has been happily married to her husband Malcolm Bruce for 29 years, and is the proud mother of three amazing daughters who are all starting their own career adventures. Shawna loves traveling, glamping, canoeing, Hallmark movies, Jack Reacher novels and her 8-year-old black lab named Whisky.

Vanessa Howard: Thank you for taking the time to participate in this IAEM interview today. We are profiling EM professionals because we want to showcase the important work that emergency managers do across the country and how this work varies from region to region and also within the different roles of emergency management. I wanted to start off by asking you how did you get involved in emergency management?

Shawna Bruce: I started my career as a public affairs officer in the army where our members supported domestic operations.

This included forest fires and floods in various parts of Canada. My role at the time was to tell the stories of

what our soldiers were doing to support these operations here at home. We were never the lead organization, so we had to be very careful to focus our communications about the response on what the municipality or the province was doing and what we were doing to support them. So, my first real foray into EM was with the military, but then I returned to school to learn more about disaster and emergency management, and upon retiring from the military, I transitioned into industry where I worked at Dow Chemical Canada. Although my position was a public affairs role, a big part of my responsibility was also supporting the emergency operations team, being the lead for crisis communications and the PIO, and

engaging in outreach for community emergency management and public notifications. So that's really when I got into the emergency management field.

Vanessa: We often hear of emergency managers who began in the military or a response agency and then transition into either private or public sector emergency management. It is interesting to hear how you focused your efforts on communications.

Shawna: When I went to Royal Roads for the MA DEM program, there were no dedicated communicators that had attended their program before me. Initially, when people heard about my backyard, they assumed the focus was on challenges in communications regarding inter-operability or interagency coordination. I had to explain that I was exploring how you talk to your residents and stakeholders.

That was the lens I was looking through and I realized it was quite different than my counterparts.

Vanessa: Did you have any assumptions when you entered into the field of emergency management that were challenged once you were in the field?

Shawna: I assumed that within emergency management, leaders and managers understood the importance of the public information officer role and how that role could support operational objectives. I thought leaders understood how critical communication was to a success response and what I found was that there was a disconnect.

We train a lot of people regarding Planning, Ops, and Logistics through ICS but we don't always train the comms team. There isn't always consideration for the training required for the person who supports the mayor in their day job, but needs to transition into a new and essential role during a disaster to support emergency communications. Sometimes assumptions are made that you can put anyone into that role. My oversight or assumption was assuming

that everyone understood how critical that role is to response success.

I am always championing that idea that if you're leading a team as an emergency manager or an incident commander, you need to get your communication teams up to speed. I tell that to everyone who will listen.

Vanessa: Absolutely, I agree with you 100%.

Shawna: I am really passionate about this. I really want to help organizations and emergency managers understand how they can get critical information out to the public in a timely and effective manner. In this age of social media, how do you get that information out as fast as the public expects it? Also, what tools can we give to emergency managers and public information officers to help them get that information into the hands of those who need it? I am not sure we offer enough training to prepare our communications people to be really effective in this important role. That's why I decided to retire from Dow Canada. It's allowing me to really focus on this passion of mine.

Vanessa: Have you found any strategies for success to advocate that we do more training or to better fund that training within municipalities or organizations?

Shawna: I think, sadly we embrace this when we see a disaster in a different organization or municipality, and we realize "oh my gosh this could've been me." Unfortunately, we see few positive or good examples of effective communications and we have too many examples of where it didn't go well.

When I do my workshops and training for clients I try to focus on local hazards and how these things could be relevant for them and their community. I want them to see themselves in the case studies, and talk through the scenarios and start planning their holding statements and key messages so they recognize the importance of planning in advance.

I pushed really hard to get the public information officer training in with Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT)'s Centre for Applied Disaster and Emergency Management (CADEM) for the IMT Academy last October. Initially it wasn't included in the program, but the CADEM team recognized the importance of having this critical training included and the participants enjoyed the course so we plan to run it again in 2020.

There was a scribe course and, of course, the scribe is so important as well, however when you read after action reports across Canada for disaster event, it's communication that remains a challenge – we need to get better at this.

Vanessa: In your opinion what are the key skills needed by emergency management professionals in supporting the public information officer role?

Shawna: Well, first of all, you need to have initiative. I think this is important because a public information officer needs to be thinking with a strategic mindset. They need to be staying a step ahead of the decisions that are being made and considering the impact those decisions will have on the community or stakeholders.

You always need to be asking, "How is this decision going to impact the public or my audiences?"

You need strong interpersonal skills and to be an excellent relationship builder because it is all about relationships. You're relying on everyone else around you in order to do your job - and to do that well you need to develop those relationships in advance.

In my mind, those skills are critical.

But you also need to have courage and that's not something we really talk about in emergency management.

I am talking about the courage to step up and invite yourself to the table and be there for those important

conversations. The courage to offer your opinion even though it might not be the popular one and the ability to stand up for what you believe is the right approach. But then you also need the courage to stand down if your advice or guidance is not taken. Your role is to provide expert advice and guidance to the incident commander or emergency operations director which they may or may not take. If they choose not to take your advice, then you need a Plan B.

Of course, you also need solid writing and verbal skills, to be a team player, be able to analyze information, work under pressure on tight deadlines, and maintain your composure. You don't know what kind of information you may need to deliver; it could be fatality information, really tragic information, or simply risk information.

Vanessa: I can't help but think that's an amazing list and the only one trait I personally wonder about adding would be empathy.

Shawna: Oh yes, absolutely empathy is critical. We don't talk about empathy very often. When I provide media training to clients they are often very fearful of showing any kind of emotion. But, if you've had a fatality at your industrial site or you're dealing with a situation where people have been displaced you need to show empathy. I always talk about the three A's of crisis communications. **Acknowledge**, **Accountability**, **Action**. **Acknowledge** you understand that the situation is hard and impacts people, take **Accountability** and ownership of the crisis, and then take the **Action** you said you were going to take and show that you're doing it.

There's nothing wrong with showing a little bit of emotion during the delivery of those kinds of messages; I think it resonates with the audience more when you don't look like an organizational puppet, you look like a human being delivering a really important message.

Vanessa I recognize that through NAIT's IMT Academy you provide some education for public information officers, but do you have any additional resources that you would recommend?

Shawna: We have a bit of a challenge in Canada at the moment because we have part of the country doing the FEMA courses through the US and others are waiting for ICS Canada to roll out their public information course.

So, depending on where you are in Canada watch for those courses and take advantage of what is made available to you. In the meantime, get yourself on any incident command system courses you can. I'd recommend at least up to ICS 300 so that you understand the role that everyone plays. We are all communicators at the end of the day. And if you have post-secondary education or private education offered in your region on crisis communication take it as well as any media training you can access.

Organizations can't assume that the communications person or team you have in your organization are ready and has had the training they require to perform in this role. Emergency Managers need to help resource their communications teams with both people and funding and support them getting formal training. Help them fill up their toolbox of skills.

One thing people can do for themselves at no charge is to read after action reports when they are made available. They are filled with great information about challenges that recent disasters in Canada have had with communications. We call them lessons learned but unless people are reading them, digesting them, and changing their behaviour because of them, they're not really lessons learned they are more like lessons identified.

We are lucky in that there are excellent blogs, LinkedIn groups, podcasts, and Facebook groups. Those are great resources and they're free. You can

join them and get access to these networks and information at your fingertips. That's what I still do today, and I would recommend anyone in the industry do the same. Get connected.

Vanessa: What is something you wish someone had told you when you first started working in emergency management?

Shawna: I think it goes back to what I said before that most emergency managers didn't understand the role of the public information officer and how they could support them. If I had understood that disconnect I would've started talking about this and championing this earlier in my career.

I wish it was better understood that public audiences are not just grading organizations on how well they handled a disaster but how well they communicated about what they were doing to respond to that crisis or disaster. Success from the public perspective is how well you communicated about the event. And you don't get successful as a communicator unless you prepare. In reality, 95% of what communicators or the PIO do in a crisis can be developed ahead of time. They really only do 5% of their job in a crisis scenario. It is all about preparedness. I wish someone had told me that that is not always understood.

Vanessa: As you've been talking I can't help but reflect on how it doesn't matter so much to the general public about the details of how you did it but instead did you make them feel safe? Did you make them feel like you were taking care of their needs throughout the disaster and did you make them feel heard, safe, and confident? The feelings will be the part of the response that they remember.

Shawna: Exactly, the public is not inside your emergency operation centre or your crisis communication centre. They don't see how well you're responding, how committed and switched on your team is, and how prepared you are. So, unless

you're telling them that you implemented your emergency response plan right away, had messages out within 15 minutes etc. they just don't know. And then they start filling in that information void with their own assumptions or misinformation

Then they start asking questions due to the lack of information and that's when they start getting suspect. They wonder, "What aren't you telling me? Were you not ready?" They start creating their own narrative because you haven't provided your narrative to them.

Vanessa: That's such an important message to share thank you. You have already referenced several great free resources which I think are fabulous and highly encourage everyone to take advantage of the list you have provided. Are there any other resources you feel are worth paying attention to?

Shawna

I have to say that anyone coming into this field needs to be a member of the International Association of Emergency Managers (Canada.) In my mind if you're going to work in this industry, the networking, the resources, and opportunities through them are invaluable. Also, that membership provides a gateway into the FEMA training online as well. I don't think that people realize how you can get the FEMA student number to do courses online.

Additionally, Public Safety Canada puts out all kinds of documentation. [The Emergency Management Framework for Canada](#) that was published is essential. As a professional you need to understand that document and how it pertains to you.

It is important to understand at the local level what is the big picture for emergency management in Canada. In the military we call it The Commander's Intent, or the big holistic picture.

The [Canadian Risks and Hazards Network](#) is another great resource and they have publications that come out regularly.

Also look at what your provincial office for emergency management is doing and publishing as well as your local municipalities. Start building your network locally and build it up. We often call emergency management a team sport and those relationships are critical.

The networking capabilities within the social media space are fabulous. You can pose a question to IAEM Canada through Twitter or LinkedIn, or a Community Facebook page and you will get amazing responses from professionals who are happy to share their advice and resources with you.

For example you can say, "Has anyone ever had to facilitate the transport of 500 cows through a flooded area?" and someone will pop up and say "Yes I did and this is how we did it and this is what we learned from it." That's remarkable.

Vanessa: Do you have any advice for someone who's just starting out in the field?

Shawna: There are many programs out there today and there are also many more jobs coming available. At NAIT I am a part-time instructor in the Disaster and Emergency 2-year diploma program which is done entirely online. Many students come in without any experience. I tell those who ask to join organizations like IAEM and to look for volunteer opportunities through the Red Cross, in a simulation exercise or volunteer at a conference. It's a great way to make connections. Secondly, I'd suggest finding a mentor. Mentors can be a wealth of knowledge and a great sounding board.

And the last thing would be to read. General (ret'd) Jim Mattis former Secretary of Defense (US) wrote " if

you don't read you're illiterate." That quote really resonated with me!

The only way we're going to avoid repeating past mistakes is if we're reading about what happened and how to make sure that we don't do it again.

So volunteering, getting a mentor, and reading are the three things I would recommend over anything else to someone entering into the field

Vanessa: To take those ideas a step further, what are key lessons you've learned in your career?

Shawna: I've learned that your professionalization and your craft will stand on its own if you deliver results and act in an ethical manner and demonstrate integrity and professionalism. I think I struggled with imposter syndrome over the years. This was largely because I was often the only female officer, or the only communicator and took me some time to understand that by delivering results, I was developing relationships and then I had people I could lean on when I needed them. I think a second thing I learned was that I although I was often an office of one, that didn't mean I had to work in isolation or in a silo. We have to be collaborative.

People talk about the four C's: Collaboration, Cooperation, Coordination, and Communication. Of course, they save the best (communication) for last! A good idea becomes an awesome idea once you build on it with others. This is why relationships matter so much.

It is also important to seek diversity in your networks. You want to invite people who will challenge your way of thinking and challenge you, because that's how you will arrive at a better solution.

Be a leader would be the last thing that I would add. Sometimes you're leading from the front and other times you're pushing from behind and it doesn't matter which way that goes as long as you get there.

Vanessa: I know we have talked about amazing emergency management reading resources in earlier conversations. Can you share the books you feel have been influential in your career?

Shawna: I love to read and I have a few on my bookshelves. I like reading [about leadership](#) and how people [think during disasters](#). I think it's essential to understand their experiences and study actions taken so we can better anticipate the information they need to take the actions we want them take.

I really think the [Fern-Banks](#) series that has been written over the years is excellent, I think I have all of them. Another great publication is [called A Matter of Trust](#) in which there are a series of case studies that demonstrated how important public participation is in the planning phase of energy projects. In my mind it highlights the important role the public could play in supporting emergency management programs if we bring them into the conversation.

The [Red Cross](#) is doing such a great job of putting out important [publications](#) because of the data they're capturing through their surveys and oral history. It is incredibly useful information regarding social media and will assist planning for future disasters.

There are several others, including [Melissa Agnes' book, Crisis Ready](#).

And finally, I would say anything local. For example, I had a chance to be in Halifax and went to their Maritime Museum. They had an amazing display on the Halifax Explosion, and I picked up a couple of books written by local authors. These [books](#) consider the explosion and the road to recovery from a local archival perspective.

Vanessa: I can't wait to add a few of these to my bookshelf. I've listed the resources at the end of this article. Do you have any words to live by as a crisis communicator working in emergency management?

Shawna: Be prepared with an effective crisis communications plan because this is your compass and it will navigate you through any crisis.

The majority of the work for a crisis communicator can be prepared before a crisis, so make the time you need to do the work before it is needed. It is always a secondary duty, but needs to be made a priority.

One of my favourite quotes that I used to have hanging on my door when I worked in the military was, “Communicators are most effective when they are informed.”

It’s frustrating as a communicator to be asked to comment on something that you know nothing about. A communicator can’t help you navigate where you’re going to end up if the communicator doesn’t have all the information so bring them into the discussion early. I’d suggest letting your communication teams decide what they need to know. Let them triage the information so they get the big picture and context of an issue – before it becomes a crisis. Also, practice your plan. Make sure people know their roles and responsibilities.

Vanessa: Looking forward, what do you see as an emerging challenge for emergency managers?

Shawna: I think technology and emergency communications will continue to be a challenge for sure. The public is relying on social media to get updated information in a disaster and immediately after a crisis. Some emergency management organizations are not on board with communicating through these methods and this may be because we’re not always resourcing those communication professionals in our organization effectively. There is a cyclone of information during a crisis and you need people dedicated to posting updated and trusted information and messages. Someone needs to be answering questions and others monitoring for misinformation. This takes a team, not a single person.

Additionally, we need to anticipate how we’re going to manage our communications if there are power outages? How do we get information out as quickly as we can while we still have the capability to do so? We need to be telling the public where to go and get information in case technology fails us.

I think technology is going to keep advancing and we need to stay current.

We also need to do more training for emergency management professionals regarding how to build and sustain community relationships within their organizations and building collaborative partnerships.

I think we understand this but perhaps we haven’t done quite enough to build this competency. For example, are we communicating with our chamber of commerce about how critical it is that small businesses are able to be up and running following a disaster? Or engage with 4H groups who could be effective to help evacuate livestock during a disaster? Communities have natural partnerships in place, so let’s break down the silos and start working together. As we see more graduates of programs coming into these roles, we are seeing more collaboration. We’re heading in the right direction.

Vanessa: Thank you so much for this wonderful conversation and your insights.

Here is the list of Shawna’s recommended resources:

Books

CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. (2017). **Master Your Disaster**. North Charleston, South Carolina.

Agnes, M. (2018). **Crisis Ready**. Herndon, VA: Mascot Books.

Fearn-Banks, K. (2017). **Crisis communications: a casebook approach**. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Fink, S. (2013). **Crisis communications: the definitive guide to managing the message**. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.

Kitz, J. F. (1989). **Shattered city: the Halifax explosion and its aftermath**. Halifax, N.S.: Nimbus.

Mattis, J. N., & West, B. (2019). **Call sign chaos: learning to lead**. New York: Random House.

Morgan, A., & Lynch, C. (2017). **Leading from the front: no-excuse leadership tactics for women**. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.

Phillips, B. (2013). **The media training bible: 101 things you absolutely, positively need to know before your next interview**. Washington: SpeakGood Press.

Ripley, A. (2009). **The unthinkable: who survives when disaster strikes - and why**. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Podcasts

Emergency Preparedness in Canada:

<https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/epic-podcast-3/epic-podcast-2>

Invincible Brand with Melissa Agnes:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/invincible-brand-with-melissa-agnes/id887185077>

Videos

FEMA Prep Talks

<https://www.fema.gov/preptalks>

MYD Master Your Disaster with Leann Hackman-Carty

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnOFul93EAL2VeWbX3gRaCg/featured?disable_polymer=1

Publications

<https://cwf.ca/research/publications/a-matter-of-trust-the-role-of-communities-in-energy-decision-making/>

https://www.redcross.ca/crc/documents/Disasters_report_2018.pdf

<https://www.redcross.ca/crc/documents/Social-Media-in-Emergencies-Survey-Oct-2012-English.pdf>

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