

# Lasting Lessons from the 2018 IAEM-Canada Conference (and why you should attend the conference in 2019)

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With the 2019 IAEM-Canada Conference fast approaching, you may still be debating whether the event is worth your scarce professional development dollars. To help you with your decision, here is one attendee's reflections and lessons learned following the 2018 conference.

## Three Key Ideas

The inaugural IAEM-Canada Conference certainly delivered on the theme of "Emergency Management Leadership and Innovation." Since the conference adjournment last June, three key ideas have returned to my thoughts regularly and are now part of my EM toolkit.

**1. The goal of training must be to develop muscle memory.** In times of stress, people fall back to their regular habits and what is familiar. In short, we fall back to our training. This idea was repeated by several speakers. In a galvanizing and deeply personal presentation, Ryan Turner discussed the Henderson County EOC's response to the October 2017 mass shooting in Las Vegas. Even though some

members were personally impacted by the incident, the EOC ran smoothly because processes had become reflex. The training took over. As Ryan said, we need to be intentional about preparing our teams.

**2. We need to push our exercise programs.** In his presentation, "The Seven Deadly Sins of Emergency Management," Past FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate echoed Ryan's call-to-action for better training. One of Fugate's "sins" is our tendency to exercise to success, not to failure. As a result, our training exercises and simulations do not go far enough to test the limits of our emergency response capacity. Exercises are invaluable opportunities, not only to practice roles but also to identify problem areas, technology shortcomings, communication obstacles, and a host of other factors that could reduce the effectiveness of an actual response. So think about the worst case, and work the challenges. If we are going to fail, better for us to fail during a simulation than during a real incident.

**3. Understanding how our brains create meaning can help us be more effective at emergency response.** With a highly interactive presentation, David Parsons demonstrated how our brains use shortcuts and biases, relying on stored data to interpret information and create meaning. Even when we are presented with the same image or sound, these interpretations vary between individuals. (Remember *Yanni or Laurel?*) When we are under stress, we also create stories and explanations to make sense of incomplete data as a way to understand what is happening. This understanding, however flawed, helps our brains relax. This means that during response, emergency managers need to work deliberately to ensure a common narrative or a common operating picture. We need to prioritize regular briefings, use simple language, and question assumptions to ensure that all responders are creating (and working with!) the same understanding of the incident.

## Lessons Learned From Each Other

There are also many lessons that we can learn from each other. The caliber of presenters at the 2018 conference was outstanding, but the conversations and ideas exchanged during the breaks and over lunch were just as important to my conference experience. These opportunities for exchange are essential for continued development of the EM profession in Canada. My calendar is already marked for this June, and I look forward to another stimulating conference. ▲



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