

An Interview with Shane Schreiber

Hello everyone and welcome to the fourth Canadian Emergency Management feature. Today we're talking with Shane Schreiber, the Managing Director of Alberta Emergency Management Agency. We had our very own IAEM Marketing and Communication Committee team member, Christina Caffrey recommend Shane for this interview.

Shane was a Canadian Army officer in the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) for almost thirty years, and is an avid historian and author. He reached a point in his career where he wanted to do something different, and the switch to emergency management seemed a good fit with skills he had developed in planning, collaboration, intellectual agility and ability to work under pressure. Shane had some colleagues that made a similar transition, that headhunted him to come and work for them, making the transition easy.

When asked how long Shane has been working in the field of emergency management, he recognizes that it depends on how you look at it. After all he joined the military some 35 years ago, which developed the skill sets and challenges that are quite similar and faced in emergency management.

While in the Army Shane took part in a number of domestic response operations, such as the 1997 and 2011 Manitoba Floods, wildfires and other extreme weather events, but also saw all kinds of emergencies and disasters in his deployments to Bosnia and Afghanistan. In fact, Shane's operational tours overseas could be looked at as a series of complex emergencies that just also happened to include military operations.

Keep reading to read more of Shane's stories, advice he has for those entering the industry and the connection between emergency management, business continuity and the community.

IAEM (HM): What emergency activation (disaster) do you remember most from your career and why?

Shane: I think it would have to be the Southern Alberta Floods in 2013. I was the Plans Chief in the Provincial Operations Center, and was the manager on duty the night the flood started. I wound up being sent down to High River to take over as the Director of Emergency Management at a critical juncture, when we declared the first ever Provincial State of Emergency. I remember listening to all of the reports of the challenges and crisis that High River was facing, and thinking – “thank God I'm not the poor sucker down there that's responsible to clean up that mess...” and then my phone rang, and “Tag - I was it.” But I also remember how many people worked so selflessly and generously to save that town and bring it back.

IAEM (HM): Being in Emergency Management you must have seen a lot. Can you identify and

describe what you believe to be the most important thing that needs to change in this field, to improve the Emergency Management industry?

Shane: The most important thing, but the hardest thing, will be to adopt and operationalize the “whole of society” resilience approach to emergency management outlined in the recently released [Emergency Management Strategy for Canada](#), because of the complexity but also the power that the broad inclusive approach to emergency management brings. It now means there are far more actors legitimately working in the emergency management “space” – and that means more complexity, potential friction, and challenges, but also means more capacity, support and solutions. It really is a brilliant time to be in emergency management – it’s not just a growth business, but a rapidly maturing profession that is clearly becoming more important to society as we face the combined challenges of the future.

IAEM (HM): You mention challenges, what are some of the challenges you’ve experienced working in this field and some of the lessons that you’ve learned over the course of your career?

Shane: Yikes – I could write volumes. The biggest challenge is also usually your biggest asset – the people. Most people want to help, even if they have been affected by the emergency. In my experience, the biggest challenge is always trying to channel all that great energy and positive intention into a synchronized effort and effect. I guess I’d say that I’ve learned, or maybe even re-learned, three key lessons in all my experiences:

1) No amount of legislation or regulation can replace a culture of collaboration and cooperation in an emergency. In short, a culture that encourages collaboration, mutual respect, and focuses on the outcomes is more instrumental in creating success than process or rules – you need those, but they need to guide and drive solutions to the unexpected. When dealing with the unthinkable and the unknowable, a framework is important, but teamwork is essential.

2) You never know who is going to be able to help you, and vice versa, so build your networks early, often, and always, because you must be able to work at the “speed of trust.” An effective team is built in the days, weeks and years before an event, so emergency managers have to be out there building their teams – and you don’t know who might even be on your team – all the time.

3) Communicate, Communicate, Communicate. Information is the most valuable commodity in an emergency, and you need to communicate early, often and always so that everyone involved can make the best informed decisions possible.

IAEM (HM): Your second lesson learned is all about emergency managers, your networks and relationships. How have building these relationships and contacts supported you throughout your career, emergency response and/or other activities?

Shane: When I was a very young officer in the Army, a very wise old Sergeant once said to me, “Sir, you aren’t going to be successful unless a lot of other people want you to be.” So, for whatever success I may have had, it’s all been due to a lot of other people supporting me in whatever effort I have been involved with. In the end, maybe more so than almost any other profession, emergency management is a people business, and you will never be successful in it unless a lot of other people want you to be.

IAEM (HM): So with that being said, who are the key stakeholders you find you need to build relationships with in order to succeed in your profession?

Shane: All of them... But seriously, there are such a wide variety of stakeholders working in the emergency management space, and they all bring certain strengths and capabilities. I think for our Agency, however, it is the municipalities and local authorities that are our key stakeholders because they are really responsible for responding to 98% of all emergencies in the Province. If they are prepared and resourced to look after, prevent and respond to events at their level, it keeps them from growing to become problems that multiple jurisdictions have to deal with.

IAEM (HM): What and how do you collaborate best with other Emergency Managers?

Shane: In advance of an event over lunch or an adult beverage.

IAEM (HM): In your experience, what is the key to developing a good team and stakeholder relationship?

Shane: Three things,

1. Trust
2. Communication, and
3. Shared experiences / challenges.

IAEM (HM): Which of the four pillars in emergency management do you feel is the most important and why (planning, preparedness, mitigation, response & recovery)?

Shane: I would love to say preparedness and mitigation, because if you get that right, you don't have to do response and recovery. But the reality is no plan is perfect, and emergency management deals with the unknowable and the unthinkable, so you always have to be ready to respond and recover – those are “no choice, no fail” tasks – so my experience has been that response is the most important. Although the correct answer is that they are all important.

IAEM (HM): Do you consider Business Continuity to be a big part of Emergency Management?

Shane: Absolutely – I consider them to be two sides of the same coin, and the same “rules” and fundamentals support both endeavours.

IAEM (HM): How do you work with local businesses to support their business continuity plans or the development of the business continuity program?

Shane: We advocate and encourage businesses of every size and shape to think about their continuity plans, and to look at it as an opportunity to create a competitive advantage or additional market share. If you are still up and running, but your competitor's not – well, you win in a bunch of different ways.

IAEM (HM): What do your day-to-day activities and routine look like?

Shane: Meetings, meetings, and more meetings. Like I said, it's all about networking, coordination and communication, so get used to lots of meetings if you are an executive in emergency management.

IAEM (HM): Let's switch gears a little and talk about why you enjoy working in the emergency field and what your greatest accomplishment is?

Shane: Emergency Management brings you a new challenge every day. It deals with the “unknowable and unthinkable, and I love the intellectual challenge of building an effective system of systems to deal with the unthinkable, and then making it work in the face of a real and complex event. I also get a charge out of the people working in emergency management – they are a lot like soldiers – selfless, highly motivated, dedicated, and always up for a challenge.

My greatest accomplishment, that's a tough one – I think it has to be leading the provincial response to the 2016 Wood Buffalo Wildfires. That was a highly complex event with international exposure, but we had an incredible team and great support from across the country, and I think it really showed the value of building relationships and working at the “speed of trust” with a wide variety of stakeholders.

IAEM (HM): What do you know now that you wish you knew when you were starting in the Emergency Management field?

Shane: The impact that vanity, hubris, and ego can have on emergency plans and protocols.

IAEM (HM): What is one piece of advice that you would offer young professionals entering the world of Emergency Management?

Shane: Build your networks early and often, because you never know who is going to be able to help you in an emergency.

IAEM (HM): If someone wanted to volunteer or learn more about Emergency Management, where would you direct them or what guidance would you provide?

Shane: Volunteer with an NGO like Team Rubicon, Samaritan's Purse, Salvation Army, the Red Cross, or volunteer to help out with your local community's emergency management program. You will not only gain some practical knowledge, but you'll also start building your network.

IAEM (HM): This next question is a little bit off point but given that technology has advanced since the start of your career and continuously changing at a rapid rate, I always like to ask, how has technology and social media improved professionals in emergency management ability to respond to disasters and events?

Shane: Technology has helped to speed the flow and amount of information, but it doesn't necessarily help you analyze and act, especially because in emergencies you seldom have perfect information or the time to wait for perfect information. If you are waiting for some IT or AI program to tell you what to do to handle all the aspects of a complex emergency – you may not like the outcome.

We'd like to take this opportunity to thank Shane Schreiber for his time and efforts in the interview process, being part of the IAEM Features and for his contributions to the Emergency Management fields. Our fingers are crossed and hope that Shane doesn't see any wildfire activity for the duration of the summer, and if any are active when this article is published, he has all the support needed and everyone is safe.

If you have any comments or would like to recommend someone as an Emergency Management/ Business Continuity Feature, please contact IAEMCdnComms@gmail.com. In the meantime, get ready for our next article as we will be meeting with our very own IAEM Canadian President, Paula Gibson.