



HazMat/CBRN Training Challenges and Their Real World Implications

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We often see articles (or blogs) addressing the need to design more realistic HazMat/CBRN training for our first responders. Drills and exercises do in fact, need to be realistic. The adage that we must “train as we would fight” are not just words to be uttered in vain, although far too many in the first responder and emergency management communities still treat them that way.

The simple fact is, the threats are real. There will always be accidents and there will always be someone out there trying to find a way to bring their cause or beliefs to life through violence and/or acts of terrorism.

First responders have a duty to those they serve to be prepared for those threats, by being both competent and proficient in dealing with them. That is no small task! Likewise, those of us who serve as trainers to the first responder community have a duty to ensure they are properly trained, and both competent and proficient in performing their duties.

Here in the United States, it is estimated that somewhere in the high 80% of fire departments are volunteer or are departments mostly comprised of volunteers. Having worked with and been involved in training with many of these departments for years now, I have observed some concerning realities.

First, training is a challenge! The reality is men and women volunteer for these departments wanting to serve their family, friends, and neighbors. Each and every one of these men and women has a “heart of gold”, and they give freely of themselves and their time in their act of service.

At the other end of that reality is the fact that, while they know firefighting, many of these departments really do not know or understand what their annual training requirements are, and many may not be meeting them.

These departments often struggle to get their teams in for any kind of training, since they are volunteers and are often working one or more jobs. While they are trained to their firefighter levels, they may consider themselves fortunate if they have anyone that is “Operations Level” trained under HAZWOPER or NFPA, let alone anyone who is “Technician Level” or higher.

So the question becomes, how do we ensure that we develop and maintain capabilities across the country, whether here in the U.S. or elsewhere, where this is the reality?

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There is no clear-cut answer to that, and I am not sure I can even argue there is a viable, let alone practical way for us to ensure more advanced capabilities for many communities who rely on volunteers. It is not for a lack of desire, it is merely the reality of being a volunteer on top of everything else in life.

That being said, in many cases we trainers need to take a step back and assess the needs and fundamentals of those we train first. The best scenario, or the latest in equipment, means absolutely nothing unless each and every responder possesses the competency and proficiency to properly operate the equipment they have; and that they know how to accurately record, report and/or interpret the information the equipment provides.



They must know and be able to demonstrate and maintain their competency and proficiency for each piece of technology they have in their package, including an understanding of its capabilities, its limitations and its proper application(s). This is a point of failure; and we have to be willing to identify and address this before we can even hope to benefit from any drill or exercise, no matter how realistic they may be.

Many departments are hesitant to participate in training, drills, and exercises because they recognize their own deficiencies in the use of the various pieces of detection equipment, be they chemical, biological, or radiological. No one wants to look bad in front of others!

Training and exercise professionals need to recognize this challenge and address the gap by first ensuring our first responders possess the knowledge and skills they need to confidently, competently, and properly utilize their equipment. This is where the “tire meets the road.”

There are far too many first responders who operate equipment the way there were taught by some “well-intended person”, who may not be properly trained themselves, having neither read the operations manual nor taken training from a qualified instructor. If that cycle continues throughout the department, you soon have a group of responders who could well do more harm than good.

We, as trainers, also want to see real “value-added” and be able to measure the “return on investment” (ROI) for all our training opportunities. Incorporating the use of simulators is one way we enhance everyday training opportunities in addition to making drill and exercise environments more realistic.

The best way to learn is by having your hands on the equipment you use, however, we do not want to risk the health and safety of our first responders by needlessly exposing them to live agents or live (radiological) sources.

Having access to simulators and having them in hand, gives your trainees a more realistic sense of the equipment and performing their response activities without the unnecessary risks. Simulators will never completely eliminate the need to do live agent and live source training, but developing and maintaining competency by utilizing simulators is very much a value-added capability to any training professional.

Realistic training must start from the very beginning. Enhanced drills and exercises serve no one well if the people who need to utilize the equipment lack competency, proficiency and/or comfort and security in their knowledge or ability to use it.

Adding simulators to your training regimen will certainly offer opportunities to train in ways that were not available to you before!

An added benefit... they also help generate and retain interest in training because they “keep it real” from beginning to end for your participants.

WRITER BIO

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