

A conversation with Craig Fugate: the importance of asking the right questions

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Former US FEMA administrator Craig Fugate recently shared insights from his career with practitioners and policymakers in Brisbane, Canberra and Melbourne, hosted by AIDR. In sessions delivered with compelling narrative and passionate advocacy, the discussion repeatedly wound its way back to the point of ‘so what’: the need to work backwards from an outcome to ask the right questions, and prioritise information from ‘noise.’

In the American vernacular, the ‘so what’ test is a blunt means of challenging the relevance or value of any piece of information. ‘So what’ is effective because it is outcomes-oriented. ‘So what’ asks what anyone would do differently, based on the information or the response to a question being asked. How will it affect the outcome?

Craig Fugate asserts that emergency managers must start from exercising worst-case scenarios; what he termed the ‘maximum of maximums’. During his tenure at FEMA he exercised emergency scenarios to the potential extremes that can be caused by environmental hazards, no matter how horrific, using available science and calibrated data to dictate these scenarios. Confronting the worst that could happen allows us to understand what further demands need to be met under catastrophic circumstances (the ‘demand signal’) and highlights the inevitable government shortfall—whether or not it makes us uncomfortable.

Identifying the gap between government response capacity and the projected demand signal highlights the need to operate differently in the chaos of a disaster, rather than relying on a hypothetical scale-up of business-as-usual systems.

Working back from this starting point, Craig urged his audiences to ask the right questions to leverage the strengths of both community and the private sector, to shrink the gap between capacity and demand. Many may be familiar with his Waffle House Index—measuring the severity of a disaster by the rate at which a local fast food outlet can get up and running. Recognising that supermarkets can meet many community needs more efficiently than government aid, Craig shifted the emphasis to asking local essential businesses: ‘what can I do to get you open?’ Asking the right question revealed

a need to remove traditional logistical or regulatory barriers, enabling business to do what they do best.

Asking the right questions is also imperative to efficient community planning. In a criticism of the concept of ‘vulnerable groups,’ Craig emphasised that communities are ‘defined by people, not by us.’ Calling for more inclusive planning, he argued that the dichotomy of vulnerability emerges out of planning that fails to reflect the communities as they are. Deeper knowledge of the community and its risk profile, with a view to the worst-case scenario, is vital in breaking the cycle of ‘discovery learning’ in emergency management. In this, he drew attention to the increasing volatility of natural hazards in the context of climate change; that the ‘old ways of doing business work well—for the old business!’

Adopting a ‘so what’ approach also supports more effective outcomes in times of crisis, where ‘speed is the most precious commodity’. Prepared with a ‘good foundation of what the community was like one minute before disaster struck,’ Craig Fugate posits, we can stabilise a situation faster, again through asking the right questions: ‘what has changed? what are you going to do differently?’

Ultimately, our ability to come up with the right questions relies not on an elusive creativity, but an evidence-based end point to work back from. In Craig Fugate’s words: ‘unless we have defined the outcome, I’m not sure we know what questions to ask...questions [that] lead to things that actually change that outcome.’