

# Training – Fit for Purpose?

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**Meido Consultants** is a specialist corporate consultancy offering strategic services to individuals and organisations across the world.

**David Rubens**, Meido Consultants founder and MD and author of this report, holds an MSc in Security and Risk Management from Scarman Centre, Leicester University, is a Visiting Lecturer on their Global Security and Policing MSc programme, and is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Security and Resilience Department, Cranfield University at the UK Defence Academy, specialising in Terrorism & Public Policy, and Strategic Management & Leadership.

[david@meidoconsultants.com](mailto:david@meidoconsultants.com)

David Rubens

Meido Consultants Limited

The Arches,  
Maygrove Road  
London NW6 2EE  
[info@meidoconsultants.com](mailto:info@meidoconsultants.com)  
[www.meidoconsultants.com](http://www.meidoconsultants.com)



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I have no doubt that every single person reading this article will have undergone some sort of training at some time in their career, and many of you will have been through regular professional development programmes, designed to up-skill you and allow you to work in increasingly complex and sophisticated situations. There is no doubt that effective training is one of the fundamental requirements in the development of any team capability, and yet it is often questionable as to how effective actual training programmes are, and what benefit they bring. This is especially true when the people who are sent through training programmes, often at great expense and with the investment of valuable time and effort, then find themselves in situations where they are expected to put those training-based skills into action in the real world.

In an ideal world, training takes place over an extended period of time, with the student being taught skills in a progressive manner by someone who has learnt those skills themselves over many years, and who has had the operational experience that gives them the ability to flesh out the bare bones of the theoretical knowledge in a meaningful and relevant way. In the military this is often actually the case, though the training methods used in the military would certainly be considered inappropriate in many non-military environments.

In the civilian world however, training is often considered as necessary but expensive and time-consuming exercise, and rather than seeing training as an opportunity to develop a culture of excellence for everyone going through that system, it is looked on more as a necessary evil that should be done as cheaply and speedily as possible, based on a sausage-factory model of mass-production.

What is perhaps surprising is that this culture of 'tick-box training' continues even when we reach into the higher levels of operational management. There is a fine debate going on at the moment on the Professionals in Emergency Management group on LinkedIn concerning the value of crisis response training, and whether it actually creates greater capability to respond to the sort of mass impact and complex response situations such as Hurricane Katrina or the current BP oil spill off the southern coast of the United States. Whilst the US government has invested time, money and resources into developing federal and state-level responses to post-9/11 scenarios, the simple fact is that when these response capabilities are brought up against the real world, they are time and again found wanting, and it as though hard-earned lessons are just not being learned.

It seems that there is a simple and basic mistake being made when discussing higher-level training, and that concerns what it is we are actually trying to achieve. Many training programmes are prescriptive - ie they set up a framework that tells you what the problem is, what you should do about it and what the 'correct' response is. Even at higher levels of command training, you are marked against your ability to deliver the prescribed solution. Yet when real-life scenarios are triggered, the first thing that we can be certain of is that they will not follow the pre-set pattern, and almost from the outset of the situation there will be a state of chaos that will prevent our pre-formed solutions from being effective. Therefore, what we actually want to achieve is the ability to respond to chaos, and to find ways of imposing out command and response capability on a disorganised world that is working to its own agenda, and not adapting to ours. This ability to adapt to a rapidly changing environment, creating solutions and working together with other groups in order to deliver them, is at the root of modern problem-solving, and therefore all effective training above the basic group or unit level should to a large extent be focusing on how different groups, organisations and agencies can interact, working together to deliver a coordinated response in disorganised circumstances.

Of course, each group and agency must have the skills to be able to deliver its own services and to take responsibility for its own areas of expertise, but in any but the most simple situation, it is the ability to create new responses to changing conditions, and to deliver those solutions in a speedy and effective manner, that will let us know whether all of the investment that we have made will actually make a difference the next time that a Hurricane Katrina or similar major natural disaster strikes.



