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This document summarizes:

Schneider, Sandra K., “Administrative Breakdowns in the Governmental Response to Hurricane Katrina,” *Public Administration Review* September/October 2005: 515-516.

Management experts, whether academics or consultants, will be writing about both Katrina tragedies for some time: the Hurricane itself and the failure by government to respond appropriately. In this article, Sandra K. Schneider addresses why emergency response systems failed after Hurricane Katrina.

Schneider attributes the failures to three key causes. The first she calls “faltering mobility.” The normal process of government response to a natural disaster is a bottom up movement starting with local government then moving up to states and, finally, reaching the federal government. With Hurricane Katrina the initial response proceeded slowly and with uncertainty. Local government, overwhelmed by the disaster, failed to take the immediate steps necessary to avoid chaos. The omissions percolated up. At the state level, Governor Blanco did not declare martial law or a state of emergency. She also declined the White House’s offer to bring in National Guard troops. Finally, the federal government took little action in the initial days after the storm. President Bush pledged assistance, but stressed that “recovery will take years.” These delays and hesitations at all levels opened the doors for chaos in the most critical recovery time.

Schneider describes the second problem as one of human resources. The writer observes that neither of the last two directors of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—Joe. M. Allbaugh in 2001 and Michael Brown in 2003— had any crisis management or disaster relief experience. In the face of Hurricane Katrina, Schneider argues, neither Michael Brown nor the Secretary of Homeland Security demonstrated leadership in crisis management.

The third and final cause of breakdown that Schneider looks at is a “cloudy mission and lack of focus.” She observes that in the wake of September 11, 2001, FEMA shifted its focus from natural disasters to counter-terrorism. Structural changes also took place as FEMA moved in to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security—taking away FEMA’s independence as an agency. With these changes, an agency that used to have a clear focus now faces two separate objectives.

While it is still too early to realize all of the consequences and lessons of Hurricane Katrina (and certainly was too early when the author wrote this article in the days following the storm), Schneider offers some immediate thought for those looking at management lessons for reorganized government agencies or for situations requiring a quick response.