

**Los Angeles Fire Chief's Association
2026 Desert Conference
Continued Professional Training**



**A COMMONSENSE APPROACH
TO REAL RISK MANAGEMENT IN
PUBLIC SAFETY OPERATIONS**

**Presented by Gordon Graham
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Thank you so much for inviting me here to your Desert Conference. I was here last year and again I welcome this very brief opportunity to give you my take on what you do so that all of you can better protect your community, yourself, your women and men, your organization, your profession and our nation.

I know I have a mixed group of fire service leaders with different ranks and assignments. With this in mind I guarantee you that not every word I am going to say today will apply directly to you, but hopefully by the end of our very brief time together it will make sense and allow you to go back to your respective job and improve your operations.

For those of you I have met before, you know I have spent a huge amount of time studying tragedies. I got interested in this topic during graduate school in 1975 (and what a lucky break that was for me) – one of my professors was the “guru” on maritime tragedies. Every night we studied shipwrecks – and there have been a bunch of them around the world. How do ships end up on the bottom of the ocean?

From there we graduated to train tragedies, bridge collapses, refinery explosions, nuclear power plant tragedies, sports stadium tragedies, aviation tragedies and other tragic events that had occurred in the past. Simultaneously, I was a young cop and getting involved in all the tragedies that occurred in my profession at that time, law enforcement operations.

Also (and not to bore you) but during same time, I was fortunate to be a contributor to “The Hurt Report” – perhaps the most significant publication ever on how motorcycle tragedies occur. If you ride – you need to read this report. Professor Harry Hurt was one of my professors, and the lead author on this piece – and even today (40+ years later) his work is recognized as the leading authoritative work on motorcycle safety.

Risk managers study tragedies with one goal. If we can identify the cause of the tragedy, perhaps we can put together control measures to prevent similar tragedies from occurring.

Sadly, too many people have never been taught that a given tragedy will have multiple causes – including proximate cause, contributory causes, root causes and other “problems lying in wait” – that people knew about or should have known, and no one did anything about it prior to tragedy.

Allow me to spend some time talking about the difference between “Black Swans” and “Gray Rhinos.” So many people in our respective professions do not understand this. As a result of this lack of knowledge, the “control measures” we put in place oftentimes do not address the real cause of the problem – and future similar tragedies continue to occur again and again.

Why this occurs is interesting. Margaret Heffernan has a great book – *Willful Blindness* – and early on in her writing she explains this “why.” In too many organizations if you raise your hand and say “we have a problem” – in the eyes of many in the organization “YOU” are the problem. And this is particularly acute in government operations – and you are a government operation – because if you take that risk and raise your hand you get paid “X” – but if you don’t raise your hand – you get paid “X” – so why raise your hand? As a result, mediocrity has replaced accountability – and the whole house of cards is starting to fall apart – and you can see that in government operations around America.

What can be done to address the risks we face in any organization or profession? As I read the lawsuits, injuries and deaths, organizational embarrassments, internal investigations and even the rare criminal filing against our personnel I know that we can learn so much by studying the mistakes that have been made in the past. It all gets down to risk management.

Risks can be eliminated, minimized, controlled, avoided, shared, or transferred. Each of these is a form of risk management. There is not one of you in here today who has not heard the phrase, “risk management.” Unfortunately, the phrase is grossly misused, many times by people who have no clue what they are talking about.

America is a nation of laws. Lawyers run our country. Lawyers are very good at fixing problems after they occur. Risk managers do not think this way. Their lives are focused on “pre-incident prevention of problems.” Twenty-six of our forty-seven Presidents were lawyers!

I don’t know one educated and trained risk manager in America who holds elected office. Not one! Do you? Take a look at any government phone book and compare the number of lawyers listed to the number of risk managers. Or take a look at any government organizational chart and compare the position of lawyer to where the risk management position is. Too often, risk management is not even on the organizational chart and if it is it shares a box with Human Resources or Maintenance.

This is not something that suddenly became important to me on September 11, 2001. This has been my focus for the last 50 years. What will it take to wake people up?

Prevention is better than correction. Small, smart expenditures of effort and money up front can prevent massive downstream problems. You can make this happen individually and organizationally.

Webster takes a stab at defining “risk” as the “possibility of meeting danger or suffering a harm or loss” or “exposure to harm or loss.” As a follow then:

Risk Management is any activity that involves the evaluation of, or comparison of, risks and the development, selection, and implementation of control measures that change outcomes.

Or, more simply stated, risk management is the process of looking into the future (short or long term) and asking what can go wrong and then doing something about it to prevent it from going wrong.

It all gets down to RPM – Recognizing the risks you face, prioritizing them in terms of frequency, severity, and time to think, and then mobilizing (acting) to do something about the risks you face.

Allow me to introduce you to “The Ten Families of Risk.” As I looked at the thousands of risks that people face in a given fire service organization, I saw too many people who were overwhelmed by the volume of the issue. I wanted to make it easier to comprehend. Let’s break up the thousands of risks into ten families.

What I would like you to do after this program is to take a look at each of these ten families and ask yourself, “What are the three (or more if you feel energized) greatest risks I face in each of these families, and what control measures do we have in place to address these identified risks?” And it is my hope that this risk assessment will be an ongoing effort in your organization.

Here are the ten families of risk.

1. **External Environment** – risks arising from outside the organization that impact your organization. And we know there are a number of these, and they are increasing in frequency and severity. Included here are natural disasters, pandemics, terrorist activities and conduct (both intentional and negligent) by members our public that impacts our operations. This is the most complex and difficult family of risk you face as your control of these risks is very limited. But these risks need to be recognized and addressed if possible.
2. **Legal and Regulatory** – risks arising from the complexity of or non-compliance with of the legal framework imposed on organizations like yours in your state. If there is a law or ordinance in state or federal statutes that requires action or prohibits action – this rule must be known and followed. I am always amazed how many fire service agencies – including large ones with huge budgets – are not in compliance with the ADA, FLSA, and even the Public Records Act. And with the demand today for full transparency this could pose a major problem for you and your department. Do you have all the policies in place that are required by federal laws and regulations? Allow me to expand on this for just a few minutes.

3. **Strategic** – risks arising from the lack of priority setting and business planning leading to a reactive organization that is not prepared or flexible enough to deal with unforeseen events. This goes on a lot, particularly in smaller organizations that do not have sufficient personnel or time to plan for the future. Where will the fire service be in 30 years? If you think that it will look “pretty much the same” you may be missing the boat.
4. **Organizational** – risks arising from not clearly defining roles and responsibilities, not demonstrating the values of your organization or not having monitoring processes in place. In a nutshell, we must be concerned with PEOPLE, POLICY, TRAINING, SUPERVISION and DISCIPLINE.
5. **Operational** – how do we manage the risk of a specific task, incident or event? How do we manage the risks involved in this particular employee termination or employee threat of suicide? How we manage the risks in this particular car fire on an Interstate highway? Again, I must emphasize the importance of Recognition, Prioritization, and Mobilization of the high-risk, low-frequency, non-discretionary time tasks and the importance of daily training on these core critical tasks.
6. **Information** – we make decisions based on information. How do you know the information on which you are basing your decision is accurate and has not been vetted by someone for his or her own advantage? How do you separate the valuable information from all the data? In many organizations I have consulted with, I see that personnel are trained on how to do specific tasks – but very few organizations teach their personnel how to think. I strongly recommend training for all personnel on critical thinking skills, particularly on the specific tasks in a given job that have the highest probability of ending up problematic. Be aware of the dangers of ignorance, complacency and cognitive bias. Again, I stress the importance of decision-making training – perhaps even developing a National Decision-Making Model for all fire service personnel.
7. **Human Resources** – risks arising from the myriad issues involving personnel. This may well be the most expensive family of risk you face. Put a checkmark next to this one as it is causing us a ton of grief and needs your attention when you get back to work. If I were running any organization, I would not allow any supervisor, manager, or executive to make an employment law decision without first consulting with competent human resources personnel. Hopefully your HR people are SHRM certified – and sadly in too many government agencies they are not. All employment law is discretionary time so let’s take the time to transfer the risk to those who do the task at the highest frequency.
8. **Technology** – this is the fastest growing family of risk we face. I have major considerations about hacking, malware, software, equipment purchases and updating, employee knowledge and training, terrorism, social media, equipment failure and many other issues. Is your CTO really a CTO? Or is your CTO just the smartest person in the room with respect to computers? There is a huge difference!
9. **Financial and Reputational** – risks arising from improper budgeting, forecasting and expenditure controls, including contracting, asset management, internal audits, improper salaries, theft of cash, misappropriation of resources, misuse of

overtime and poor revenue oversight. We must be very concerned with anything dealing with money. Is your CFO really a CFO? Does she/he actually have any background in finance – or does this person just test well on promotional examinations?

10. **Political** – all your personnel should stay out of the fray of politics. Please be careful in your dealings with other elected officials – there is a lot of risk involved here. Also, your department mission should not be impacted by which political party is in control of the state.

Once again, your take back to work assignment is to sit down with a small group of peers for a few hours and ask, “in each of these families, what are the three greatest risks we face? Do we have sufficient control measures in place to address these risks?”

And if you are really into this, please take a look at the Master of Public Safety program at University of Virginia. Dr. Bryon Gustafson (a California guy) is the PhD who runs that program and he has brought me in as a professor on this topic. I spent several days in Charlottesville in May at the Graduation ceremonies at UVA – and I was so proud to walk with my students and honor them for their work – they (and you) are the future of our profession. As you look at your young women and men on your department – and you see some “rising stars” – please tell them about this great program.

Thanks for coming to this program today and I wish you continued success in all you are doing.

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Lexipol is the leader in advancing total readiness for public safety agencies, helping leaders reduce risk, ease administrative burdens, and strengthen community trust. Trusted by more than 12,000 agencies nationwide, Lexipol delivers a unified platform that integrates policy, training, wellness, and reporting to simplify operations and support data-informed decisions. By equipping leaders and teams with the tools, insights, and support they need, Lexipol makes readiness possible—today and for whatever comes next. Learn more at www.lexipol.com.

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