When disaster strikes, people respond. Initial response involves the rapid mobilization of a local core of trained individuals such as fire, police, and emergency medical services personnel, who are collectively known as “first responders.” Upon arrival at the scene, first responders often confront a variety of unofficial helpers—people who are trying to help their neighbors, friends, or who are there simply to offer assistance. In addition, the flow of communication between personnel, agencies, and the public quickly becomes complex. Local emergency managers are often at the center of these communication pipelines.

The Hazard Center’s newest monograph explores how the presence and effectiveness of emergency managers can help shape overall emergency response and recovery to a given event. Emergency managers are called upon to facilitate the smooth functioning of all responders, activities, and jurisdictions, and to create a seamless atmosphere of swift and effective response. This task is not easy, nor is it well understood. The author uses extensive interviews with over 150 emergency managers, agency executives, and emergency management team members, all of whom have participated in a large disaster response, to shed some light on the structures and strategies used to initiate and maintain the process of multiagency coordination during disaster. The key lesson from the data is that many emergency managers must learn to operate under the auspices of a new paradigm and a different perspective. They must learn to think strategically.