

The Ten CERTmandments

(by Earle Hartling, CERT Training and Education Manager, Culver City, CA)

1. Thou shalt always keep thine own self safe: This may be one of the few times when “looking out for No. 1” is socially acceptable. In fact, this rule must be followed in every, single thing we do in CERT. You, as an emergency responder, are CERT’s most important resource following a disaster. Not your fire extinguisher, not the CERTmobile... YOU. And if you don’t do everything in your power to keep yourself safe and functioning (for example, not running into burning buildings or picking up and carrying victims covered in hazardous materials), you run the risk of becoming a victim yourself, going from an “asset” to a “liability.” Then, you’re not only lost to the emergency response effort, but already scarce resources now have to be diverted to take care of you!

2. Thou shalt do the most good for the most people: It’s a sad and tragic, but unavoidable, fact that, in a major disaster, we just won’t be able to save everybody. We can only try to help as many people as we possibly can. And that may mean having to leave someone who is too far gone (euphemistically referred to as “unsalvageable”) or who would take too much time and too many people to save. That’s one reason why CPR isn’t part of the CERT curriculum; while taking the time to resuscitate one person, we could lose the chance to save many more. This may be the toughest of all the CERTmandments to accept.

3. Thou shalt walk, not run: Of course, after disaster strikes, there will be people that need help...fast! But while we need to assist people in a timely fashion, it is neither safe (see the First CERTmandment) nor efficient to rush right into any situation without a proper “size-up.” Before entering a building to perform search and rescue, we first walk around the building (Is it on fire? Do the utilities need to be shut off? Are there any hazards? Is the building going to fall down any minute?). Before treating patients, we first do a “head-to-toe” assessment (Am I treating a broken arm, when my patient is actually going into shock?). Figuring out beforehand what needs to be done and how will not only save time in the long run, but will also save lives, possibly even your own.

4. Thou shalt never go it alone: This is very simple – always have a buddy with you! Whether its fighting a small fire, searching a building or even acting as Incident Commander, no one in CERT should ever attempt any operation without having another CERT member backing him or her up. You'll need that extra pair of eyes to watch out for hazards, that extra pair of hands to help you extract a victim, that extra mind to help figure out the best course of action, and, of course, that extra pair of feet to go for help if you get stuck somewhere! But, perhaps more importantly, you'll get the enormous psychological boost from just having another person with you so you won't feel so alone in what could be a tremendously stressful situation.

5. Thou shalt know thine own limitations: Despite the valuable CERT training we've all received, we are still neither professional rescuers nor superheroes. There will be things that come up during an emergency that we're are just not capable of handling, and we will have to recognize and accept these limitations so that we can be true to the First CERTmandment (thou shalt keep thine ownself safe). This goes for any and all limitations, whether they are due to equipment (your extinguisher is too small to put out a particular fire), training (a victim needs a tracheotomy) or physical (you're on a rescue team for victim extraction but you've got a bad back). Regardless of the cause, you must keep yourself and your buddy safe and pass this information up the chain of command, so that the proper resources can be dispatched. And don't be discouraged if you have some physical limitation (bum knee, fainting at the sight of blood) prevents you from doing each and every job CERT might be called on to do. Rest assured that in a full scale disaster, there will be more than enough opportunities to help out in any number of capacities, regardless of your level of training or physical condition. Every CERT member has a place in the organization.

6. Thou shalt always stay up, up and away: This has nothing to do with the 1960's Fifth Dimension hit song or what Superman says when leaping tall buildings. Rather, it has more to do with the real estate agents' credo: location, location, location. Specifically, it refers to staying UP hill, UP wind and AWAY from hazards when setting up your CERT operations, such as the treatment area, staging area or command post. You want to stay uphill so that your operations area isn't either inundated with flood waters or contaminated by leaking hazmat containers. You want to stay upwind so that toxic fumes or smoke doesn't blow back into your faces. And you want to stay far enough away so as not to be caught up in an unexpected explosion or building collapse. (A tragic example of the latter case occurred on Sept. 11, 2001, when the N.Y. Fire Department set up their Command Post in the lobby of the World Trade Center.) In short, always locate your operations where they cannot be adversely impacted by the emergency you're handling.

7. Thou shalt always follow directions from above: We're not talking about heavenly commands from the Almighty, here. The CERT emergency response to a disaster is an organized team effort. It all starts with one person taking charge, developing a plan of action, delegating responsibilities, creating teams to handle specific functions and handing out assignments, all of which is performed through a "chain of command." Since there is no such thing as "busy work" in a disaster; every job that every team is given is critical to the success of the incident response plan, whether it's fire suppression, triage, radio communication, scribe or whatever. If an individual or a team decides that it just doesn't want to perform its assigned task, they can risk not only the success of the response, but also, quite possibly, the very safety of the responders. Therefore, each person on each team must either complete the assigned task, or else notify their supervisor (right on up to the incident commander) why the job can't be done (too dangerous, not enough resources, etc.). That way, if an assigned task isn't done, whoever's in charge can make the appropriate changes to the response plan.

8. Thou shalt never freelance nor cowboy: This CERTmandment is closely related to the Seventh, insofar as every CERT member is acting as part of an organized, team response, not as an individual.

“Freelancing” is the exact opposite of teamwork. This is when one or more CERT responders go off on their own, doing whatever they want, without consideration of the incident response plan. Not only are these rogue responders failing to contribute to the organized effort, their actions may actually work against the planned response. Furthermore, since they’re operating outside of the chain of command, if something were to happen to them, no one else would know to help them or go looking for them. “Cowboys” can be operating within the incident plan and the chain of command, but do so without proper regard to their own safety (First CERTmandment) or their personal limitations (Fifth CERTmandment). These people are the ones hacking vents through the roof of a burning building or trying to perform a tracheotomy because they saw it done on “ER.” Both freelancers and cowboys are a danger to themselves and those around them, and fail to contribute to an effective emergency response.

9. Thou shalt always know the score: In short, keep track of everything that’s going on. We always do an initial “size up” (Third CERTmandment), whether we’re dealing with the entire incident or an individual victim. However, emergency response deals with fluid and ever-changing situations, and we don’t want anyone or anything falling through the cracks. We must constantly reevaluate the circumstances we’re facing, so that we can appropriately adapt our response. Who’s on what team and which teams are still in the building? Are any of the victims in the treatment area getting worse? Are we running low on supplies? Is that fire getting bigger? As long as we consistently and constantly reexamine our situation, we won’t be faced with any nasty, avoidable surprises and neither responders nor the victims they’re helping will get lost in the shuffle.

10. Thou shalt always be prepared: Just like a good Boy Scout, this is the best way that we can be true to the First CERTmandment (keep thine ownself safe). Following this CERTmandment begins way before any real emergency occurs. Do we have 72 hours of food, water and other necessary supplies? Does everyone in the family know the home evacuation plan and how we'll reunite afterwards? Is there enough gas in the car? Have I strapped down and/or secured everything that could fall down or topple over during an earthquake? Do I know the location of alternative exits? Have I practiced my response skills at a CERT drill? Being prepared means having all the necessary supplies, equipment, training and planning already completed and in place before disaster strikes, which eliminates the need to try and figure things out while all hell's breaking loose. Even beyond that, preparedness allows you the peace of mind, even during a catastrophic event (earthquake, tornado, hurricane, etc.), that comes with the knowledge that you and your family (and, quite possibly, your home as well) will survive.