Making Global Connections
One Organization Attempts to Mend the Disconnect in Disaster Response

Lynn Fritz

Until it was sold to UPS in 2001, Fritz Companies, Inc., a global logistic services company with 11,000 employees deployed across 120 countries, provided supply chain services to more than half of the Fortune 1,000 companies, as well as to hundreds of small, local organizations in every corner of the globe. We ourselves began as a small, local customs house brokerage firm in San Francisco. To achieve success, we had to convince companies to change the fragmented way in which they historically did business.

As we grew, we found that, like most international companies, every year we had at least one office or warehouse, in some part of the world, that experienced typhoons, earthquakes, hurricanes, or other natural disasters. As more and more incidents occurred, it became clear that leaving the safety of our employees and their families to local civil and humanitarian organizations during and after disasters was not meeting our fiduciary responsibilities. We then discovered that virtually no company, large or small, had prepared a collaborative plan with local governments or humanitarian organizations, even in areas where natural disasters were almost an annual event.

Further research disclosed that local governments and even the largest and best-funded humanitarian organizations had not developed standards of preparedness in advance of disasters and had little in the form of outcome measurement. As a result, effectiveness and accountability were anecdotal at best, even as an ever-growing percentage of the world’s population was being affected by natural disasters (from 1.6 billion people ten years ago to 2.6 billion today).

The Birth of Fritz Institute

We started Fritz Institute in 2001 as the only nonprofit organization dedicated to the operational effectiveness of the organizations responsible for disaster response. We were not addressing public policy or the development of medicines and vaccines but the internal systems and processes that would enable humanitarian organizations to perform their important aid organizations:
1. No sector wide professional organization or association made up of the operational management of humanitarian

Building Systems

We began by creating a professional association for the operational and logistics management of the larger humanitarian organizations. During the past five years, it has become the center point for identifying and acting on issues common to the sector.
It has also become the connection between business and academia, which supports and helps professionalize the sector. We have gathered the best logistics, operations, and business systems professors from around the world. We have funded and written white papers about best practices, and we have funded and initiated teaching case studies so that business schools throughout the world could begin to develop a curriculum for interested students. We have also started "Corporations for Humanity," which is an association of top companies that wish to leverage their corporate social responsibility by assisting us in our efforts to invest in preparation and support in advance of crises.

Together with the largest humanitarian institution in the world, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in Geneva, we next created the first humanitarian-focused logistics technology (HLS, or Humanitarian Logistics System). This system was fully operational and in place by the time of the tsunami in 2004, and the IFRC reported being five times more effective in its response because of the software. Headquarters operations, suppliers, donors, and field operations throughout the vast tsunami region were able to get the right medicines and materials to the right places at the right time, with instant communication among everyone involved in the effort.

In late 2006, we completed Helios, a web-based system with most of the features of HLS but with additional flexibility. It can be used by any group, from the smallest NGO on the ground to the largest organization’s headquarters. Like all our initiatives, this effort was led by and funded by Fritz Institute but designed and put in place by leaders from the sector, which made up all our beta testers and our users’ group.

Humanitarian organizations have long recognized that many of their key operating positions were filled by very talented and well-meaning individuals who had little formal training. There were never enough trained people in time of crisis, and the turnover rate often exceeded 50 percent per year. Therefore there is a need for training throughout the year, and a certifiable standard of competency is critical for the community. We were asked to develop distance-learning training courses that could be used by any and all organizations in the sector, which we did, working in union with highly competent and experienced personnel from many agencies.

**Research and Results**

For years, African NGOs have asserted that one of the key reasons for their dreadful lack of results is that most interventions have been designed, financed, and supervised by donors instead of building capacity within Africa and allowing local organizations to take responsibility. To address this long-standing issue, we formed an association of fifteen African Red Cross Societies with the mission to demonstrate competency and build their local organizations into independent and viable entities. In order to do this, every member agreed to take three tests that the Fritz Institute developed, which would prove if they were working to world-class standards or not. Some passed and some failed. The test scores indicate exactly what section of the organization passed or failed, which allows us to get focused, private-sector assistance to shore up the identified weak areas. This association (NEPARC, the New Partnership for African Red Cross Societies), is growing every year and has initiated a sea change in the dynamic between donors and recipients.

In the last two years, two events in the humanitarian sector were equivalent to the epidemic of 1918: the tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. After each disaster, we sent teams to the field to interview thousands of families, thus creating the first research-valid inquiries aimed at the victims. We obtained details of their satisfaction with the humanitarian response and found out what could be done better, from their point of view, so that the community could use these findings and data for future preparedness efforts.

**Needs at Home**

The universal attention and concern created by these two disasters has brought the humanitarian sector’s system weaknesses into full view, creating a strong and ongoing demand for change. Katrina, embarrassingly, woke the United States to the fact that even in our own advanced country, there are no standards of preparedness and no functioning collaboration efforts among all pertinent players; and that, notwithstanding incredible amounts of effort, good intentions, material, and money, the operating ineptitudes resulted in tragic gaps in the support of the victims, their families, and their possessions.

The results of our research are being requested by parties throughout the world, and we authored an article in the *Harvard Business Review* in November 2006 on how the private sector can be useful in disaster preparedness and response. Based on the success of our activities and the global recognition of our expertise, we are now being asked to consider developing disaster preparedness analyses and standards here in the U.S., so that there would be means of determining preparedness before a disaster strikes. There are many vulnerable sites in this country, not the least of which is our own Bay Area.

Lynn Fritz is past CEO of Fritz Companies, Inc., a global logistics service company, and is founder of Fritz Institute, a nonprofit dedicated to global humanitarian operations. Fritz serves on the United States HELP Commission, the World Economic Forum’s Disaster Response Network, and the Boards of Directors of Integrac Global Logistics, Georgetown University, San Francisco’s Exploratorium, and the University of California at Davis’ Department of Viticulture and Enology.

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