A common theme in this week’s readings is the disconnect between DHS and FEMA. Since 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, the relationship between DHS and FEMA has been carefully dissected in hopes of determining if there is a better alternative to disaster management. It can be assumed that one of the problems with the link between DHS and FEMA is the fact that FEMA itself started off as a hodgepodge of different federal agencies, noted by Cooper and Block (2006) as a “one-stop disaster shop”. For example, FEMA incorporated the Federal Insurance Administration, Federal Preparedness Agency, Federal Disaster Assistance Administration, National Weather Service Community Preparedness Program, federal housing programs, and civil defense programs. While the organization worked hard to establish itself as an effective emergency management organization, the shift of focus from natural disasters to civil defense weakened its image (Rubin, Ward, & Wamsley 2007). This conglomeration set the stage for the failures to come as the organization has consistently struggled with communication, cooperation, and what exactly it is accountable for.

FEMA’s integration with the Department of Homeland Security has only created further problems for disaster management officials. Because FEMA did not have sound operations to begin with, it only added to the headache of trying to come up with a core disaster management organization. When Michael Brown was the director of FEMA, he pushed hard for the two organizations to remain separate. He believed that the merger would only deepen funding problems and accountability. Post 9/11, DHS officials began to take a deeper look at FEMA and determined that it was an organization with insufficient leadership under Brown, did not have enough staff, and suffered from funding issues which made it incapable of effectively fulfilling its mission regarding disasters (Cooper & Block 2006). While much of the focus has been on the incapability of FEMA, it has also been suggested that DHS is too rigid in its “command and control” system to cooperate with the emergency management networks (Waugh 2006).

The fact that DHS and FEMA have different management philosophies, only contributes to the problem. Waugh (2006) points out that FEMA’s dependency on DHS (i.e., budget, mission, and personnel) has dismantled FEMA into other parts of DHS, causing these employee’s to now focus on preventing terrorist attacks versus natural disasters or terrorist caused disasters. Constant shifting and reorganization has led to a complex and confused organization that is neither effective nor efficient in disaster management. Ward and Wamsley (Rubin 2006) suggest that the inclusion of FEMA in DHS, could have been successful had the federal government allowed FEMA to act as an independent agency. Because emergency management is such a complex system of collaborators, it is imperative to understand how networks work. In disaster response, natural or man-made, organizations from the government, ad hoc groups, the non-profit sector, and the private sector must work together. Wise (2006) characterizes this network model as “loosely structured, organizationally diverse, motivated by a broad range of interests and in part ad hoc”.

Because there have been so many problems with FEMA and DHS, it has led the federal government to examine their options in creating a better organizational solution. The federal
government is now looking to solutions such as changing federal law to give the president authority to order federal assistance in the absence of requests from state governors, enlarging the role of the Department of Defense and other federal departments for domestic emergency response, and removing FEMA from DHS and have its director report directly to the President (Wise 2006). This last suggestion is based on the idea that FEMA will operate more effectively given the opportunity to function as an independent agency, free of the different functions and mission of DHS, and will have more power in the federal government given its new position in the hierarchy. Hierarchy models work well for routine tasks. However, the non-routine nature and constant innovation regarding disaster management make this model difficult to implement (Wise 2006).

What can be done so that the government has an effective network to deal with disaster management? One suggestion is the implementation of an adaptive management style. No two disasters will be handled the same; therefore, managers must remain innovative in their approaches to these uncertain events. According to Wise (2006), adaptive management is the most suitable approach because of the complexities involved with homeland security and the organization’s constant reorganization efforts. Adaptive manage is not viewed as a replacement of the traditional hierarchical approaches; however it is meant to form a framework for the overall management of homeland security networks (Wise 2006). In this approach all disasters are treated independently as learning experiences. Managers have the capability to use feedback for organizational learning and to adapt their approach to disaster management. Stakeholders have the opportunity to come together to discuss the problem, examine data, and develop models. The managers are then tasked with developing plans to meet the goals generated by the stakeholder meeting. Once those plans are implemented, there is continuous data analysis and monitoring, to evaluate the approach to the problem and serve as a learning tool for mangers of best practices (or benchmarking), and lessons learned. Thus, creating an iterative process and ongoing collaboration between the agencies involved (Wise 2006).

By removing FEMA from DHS and allowing it to act as an independent organization, and incorporating an adaptive management style, the federal government will create a platform for greater accountability and communication between agencies. It also stands to increase the capacities of these agencies and create a stronger network for disaster management.

Outside Reference: