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### Article

## Bridging the Gap Between Preparedness and Performance: A Conceptual Framework for Activation Readiness

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### ABSTRACT

Preparedness programs often produce plans, policies, exercises, and training-completion metrics, yet real incidents and exercises continue to reveal gaps between documented preparedness and operational performance. Common breakdowns include delayed decision-making, unclear authority, inconsistent role execution, incomplete handoffs, and communication drift during the early stages of an incident. This article introduces the Preparedness Activation Model (PAM) as a conceptual, evidence-informed framework for examining how organizations may strengthen activation readiness under pressure. PAM links three interrelated components: adult learning, vested-interest-based motivation, and activation design. The manuscript distinguishes the conceptual model from a proposed implementation toolkit and evaluation framework. The toolkit includes vendor-neutral routines such as a one-page Operating Picture, five-minute decision huddle, plain-language message maps, micro-exercises, and minimal performance metrics. The evaluation framework proposes measurable indicators, including time-to-decision, decision quality, message consistency, role adherence, handoff completeness, communication accuracy, and corrective-action closure. The article also presents a proposed 30–60–90-day implementation protocol and outlines a pilot-study design for future empirical testing. PAM is not presented as a validated cross-sector intervention; rather, it is offered as a practical framework for further study, local adaptation, and comparative evaluation across emergency management, education, healthcare, utilities, public-sector, and private-sector continuity contexts.

### KEYWORDS

Preparedness; activation readiness; emergency management; adult learning; vested interest; performance measurement.

## 1. Introduction

Across emergency management and continuity disciplines, organizations can appear prepared on paper while still struggling to perform under pressure. Plans, training, and exercise calendars are commonly emphasized in school and higher education emergency management guidance (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, 2009). Yet even when these elements are in place, the first minutes of an incident can still reveal hesitation, unclear authority, inconsistent role execution, incomplete handoffs, and communication drift. These gaps are not limited to one sector or incident type. They may appear when a municipality coordinates severe weather response, a hospital manages a cyber outage, a university responds to an emerging threat, a utility addresses service disruption, or a private organization activates business continuity procedures during a regional incident. In higher education, prior campus violence and threat-management literature has emphasized the importance of preparedness, coordinated response, and comprehensive approaches to managing threats (Fox & Savage, 2009; Regehr et al., 2017).

This gap between documented preparedness and operational performance raises an important question for disaster risk management: why do awareness, planning, and training not always translate into timely, coordinated action? Technology, written policy, and compliance systems matter, but many preparedness breakdowns are also rooted in human and organizational factors (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Cvetković, 2026; Michie et al., 2011; Senge, 2006; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Individuals must understand what to do, perceive the action as relevant and feasible, trust that authority and support are in place, and retrieve practiced behaviors under conditions of uncertainty, time pressure, and incomplete information. At the organizational level, activation may also be constrained by staffing, resources, legal authority, interoperability, culture, leadership support, and competing operational priorities.

This article introduces the Preparedness Activation Model (PAM) as a conceptual, evidence-informed framework for examining this preparedness-performance gap. PAM links three interrelated components: adult learning, vested-interest-based motivation, and activation design. The model proposes that preparedness becomes more executable when learning is role-specific and problem-centered, motivation is strengthened through perceived stake, relevance, and feasibility, and activation is supported through repeated practice, feedback, decision aids, and communication routines that reduce cognitive load under stress.

The article does not present PAM as a validated intervention or universal standard. Rather, it offers PAM as a framework for further development, local adaptation, and empirical testing. To avoid conflating theory with practice tools, the manuscript distinguishes among three related elements: the PAM conceptual model, a proposed implementation toolkit, and an evaluation framework. The conceptual model explains the proposed relationships among learning, motivation, organizational support, and activation readiness. The implementation toolkit translates the model into vendor-neutral routines, including a one-page Operating Picture, five-minute decision huddle, message maps, micro-exercises, and minimal metrics. The evaluation framework identifies measurable indicators that may be used in pilot testing, including time-to-decision, decision quality, message consistency, role adherence, handoff completeness, communication accuracy, and corrective-action closure.

The purpose of this article is therefore threefold. First, it defines the core constructs of awareness, learning, motivation, readiness, activation, and performance in a way that can support future measurement. Second, it situates PAM in relation to established behavioral, learning, and preparedness frameworks. Third, it proposes a practical implementation and evaluation approach that can be tested across varied emergency management and continuity settings. By framing preparedness as a performance system rather than only a documentation system, PAM offers a structured way to examine how organizations may improve the accessibility, consistency, and coordination of practiced responses under pressure.

## 2. Methodological Development of PAM

PAM was developed as a conceptual, evidence-informed framework through an iterative process that combined doctoral research, practitioner reflection, field application, and targeted literature synthesis. The purpose of this article is not to report the findings of a new empirical study. Instead, the manuscript formalizes a practice-derived model and proposes constructs, implementation routines, and evaluation indicators to support future empirical testing.

The initial foundation for PAM emerged from doctoral research examining preparedness, safety culture, and the relationship between awareness, perceived relevance, and action in higher education settings (Shusko, 2024). That work identified a recurring concern in organizational preparedness: individuals may know that emergency plans, policies, and training exist, but awareness alone does not necessarily produce timely, coordinated action during incidents or exercises. The model was further refined through the author's professional role in campus public safety, emergency management, training, exercises, crisis planning, and cross-functional coordination.

Field application occurred primarily in higher education and public-sector preparedness contexts, including planning activities, tabletop exercises, training design, after-action discussions, emergency communication review, and coordination with internal and external response partners. These activities align with established school and higher education emergency management guidance emphasizing crisis planning, training, exercises, and coordinated response (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, 2009). This field context provided practical insight into common preparedness-performance gaps, including unclear decision authority, inconsistent activation thresholds, communication drift, incomplete handoffs, uneven participation, and limited corrective-action closure. These observations informed the practical routines later associated with PAM, including the Operating Picture, decision huddle, message maps, micro-exercises, and minimal metrics.

The literature informing PAM was selected through a targeted, narrative approach rather than a systematic review. Sources were selected based on their relevance to adult learning, motivation, disaster preparedness behavior, training transfer, stress-based decision-making, cognitive load, team cognition, high-reliability organizing, protective action, crisis communication, and organizational change. The intent was to identify bodies of work that could help explain why preparedness knowledge may or may not become coordinated action under pressure. The literature was then synthesized with field observations to identify recurring conceptual categories: learning, motivation, organizational support, practiced retrieval, communication structure, and measurable performance.

The analytical process was abductive and iterative. Rather than beginning with a fixed theory to test, the model was developed through repeated comparison between observed preparedness challenges and explanatory concepts in the literature. For example, adult-learning theory helped explain why a generic plan review may not support role-specific action. Vested interest theory helped explain why participation and ownership may depend on perceived stake, relevance, and feasibility. Training-transfer and team-cognition literature helped explain why practiced routines, feedback, and shared mental models may be necessary for performance under stress. These linkages produced the three-component PAM pathway: Learn, Motivate, and Activate.

The author's role should be acknowledged as both a strength and a limitation. As a practitioner-scholar, the author brings direct field experience with the problems the model seeks to address. This supports practical relevance and tool development. At the same time, practitioner experience may introduce interpretation bias, context specificity, and assumptions shaped by the author's operational environment. For that reason, PAM is presented as a conceptual framework requiring further testing, not as a validated intervention. Future research should examine the model across multiple settings, compare it with existing preparedness and behavior-change frameworks, and assess whether PAM-informed routines improve measurable activation-readiness outcomes.

### *2.1. What “Activation” Means at Execution Time*

For purposes of this article, activation refers to the observable use of preparedness knowledge, procedures, roles, and decision processes during an incident or realistic exercise. Activation occurs when individuals and teams can retrieve and apply practiced actions under conditions of uncertainty, time pressure, incomplete information, and competing demands (Sweller, 1988; Klein, 1998; Salas et al., 2005). It is therefore distinct from awareness, training completion, plan possession, or general readiness.

Awareness means that individuals know a plan, hazard, or procedure exists. Learning means they have acquired relevant knowledge or skills. Readiness describes the organization’s perceived or assessed capacity to respond. Performance refers to what individuals, teams, and systems do during an incident or exercise. Activation sits between readiness and performance: it is the process through which learned and practiced preparedness behaviors are accessed, coordinated, and applied at the moment action is required.

Activation can be observed through specific behaviors. These may include timely identification of decision authority, recognition of activation triggers, use of agreed-upon communication templates, assignment of task ownership, role-consistent action, disciplined information-sharing, documented handoffs, and completion of corrective actions after the event. These behaviors do not require automatic or rigid responses. Effective activation should support practiced retrieval, adaptive expertise, and disciplined decision-making rather than reflexive action in situations that require judgment.

Common activation failures are predictable. First, ambiguity about authority and thresholds can create delay or permission-seeking when action is needed. Second, communication drift may occur when multiple offices, agencies, or functions develop messages without shared structure, timing, or approval responsibility. Third, handoffs may break down when responsibilities, unresolved issues, and next steps are not documented. Fourth, even motivated personnel may be unable to act effectively if they lack authority, staffing, resources, interoperable systems, leadership support, or clear legal and organizational boundaries.

These failures suggest that activation is not only an individual motivation problem. It is also a systems problem. People may understand the plan and care about the outcome, but still struggle to perform if the organization has not created usable routines, decision pathways, communication structures, and feedback loops. PAM therefore treats activation readiness as a function of individual learning and motivation interacting with organizational conditions that either support or constrain performance (Masaba et al., 2025).

### *2.2. Bridging Theory and Practice: PAM’s Evidence-Informed Pillars*

PAM is proposed as an evidence-informed conceptual framework that connects three areas of scholarship and practice: adult learning, vested-interest-based motivation, and activation design. These pillars are not presented as new theories. Rather, PAM organizes them into a preparedness-specific framework intended to explain why organizations may achieve awareness and compliance while still struggling to perform under pressure.

The first pillar, adult learning, emphasizes that preparedness education is more likely to influence behavior when it is relevant, problem-centered, role-specific, and connected to real work. In emergency management settings, this means training should do more than communicate the existence of a plan. It should help participants understand their first actions, decision points, communication responsibilities, and handoffs. Preparedness learning that is abstract, overly general, or disconnected from operational conditions may increase awareness without improving activation readiness (Knowles et al., 2015; Morshead, 1965; Senge, 2006; Spector, 2013).

The second pillar, vested-interest-based motivation, addresses why individuals choose to engage with preparedness expectations and whether they perceive those expectations as personally rele-

vant and feasible. Motivation is not treated here as enthusiasm or compliance with a training requirement. Instead, it includes perceived stake, relevance, feasibility, confidence, and organizational support. Individuals are more likely to act when they believe the scenario could affect them or their organization, understand what action is expected, believe the action is feasible within their role, and see that leadership supports preparedness through time, resources, and visible follow-through (Miller et al., 2013; Sivacek & Crano, 1982; Skurka et al., 2020).

The third pillar, activation design, focuses on how preparedness behaviors become accessible under stress. This pillar draws from concepts related to cognitive load, stress-based decision-making, deliberate practice, team cognition, high-reliability organizing, and skill transfer. Under pressure, individuals and teams may have limited time, incomplete information, competing demands, and reduced working memory. Activation design, therefore, emphasizes practiced retrieval, decision aids, repetition, feedback, shared mental models, and disciplined communication routines. The goal is not automatic action in every circumstance, but adaptive execution supported by practiced behaviors and clear decision structures (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Ericsson et al., 1993; Klein, 1998; Salas et al., 2005; Sweller, 1988; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001).

PAM is related to several established behavioral and implementation frameworks. Like the COM-B model, it recognizes that behavior depends on capability, opportunity, and motivation. PAM's learning component aligns with capability, its organizational supports and implementation routines align with opportunity, and its vested-interest component aligns with motivation. However, PAM differs by translating those behavioral conditions into emergency preparedness routines that can be practiced and evaluated during exercises and incidents (Michie et al., 2011).

PAM also overlaps with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which links behavior to attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. PAM similarly recognizes that people must see preparedness actions as relevant, supported, and feasible. Its contribution is to focus specifically on the preparedness-performance gap and to connect those behavioral conditions to role clarity, activation triggers, communication cadence, handoffs, and response routines (Ajzen, 1991).

Implementation intentions are also relevant because they emphasize the value of linking anticipated situations with planned actions. PAM incorporates a similar logic through activation triggers, decision huddles, and scenario-based micro-exercises. However, PAM extends beyond individual "if-then" planning by addressing team-level coordination, organizational constraints, message consistency, and post-exercise corrective-action closure (Gollwitzer, 1999).

PAM also complements training-transfer models, which examine whether learning is applied in the work environment. Preparedness training often fails when participants complete the training but do not have opportunities, reinforcement, supervisory support, or tools to apply what they learned. PAM addresses this transfer problem by proposing short, repeated, role-specific exercises and feedback loops that help move learning into operational use (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume et al., 2010).

Finally, PAM is consistent with protective-action research, including the Protective Action Decision Model, which examines how people receive warnings, interpret risk, assess protective actions, and decide whether to act. PAM does not replace these models. Instead, it focuses on organizational preparedness systems and asks whether individuals and teams have been taught, motivated, supported, and practiced enough to activate appropriate actions when protective decisions are required (Lindell & Perry, 2012).

Recent articles in the *International Journal of Disaster Risk Management* further underscore the importance of preparedness capacity, communication clarity, role awareness, self-efficacy, and organizational readiness across different contexts. Cvetković and Janković (2020) examined private security preparedness for natural and anthropogenic hazards, while Cvetković (2025) addressed first-responder preparedness and capacity in the Western Balkans. Desalit et al. (2025) examined predictors of disaster response self-efficacy, including community support, past disaster experience, perceived susceptibility, and income. Razia (2025) examined teachers' disaster awareness and preparedness in school settings, and Sacyaten (2025) emphasized the importance of timely, clear, trustworthy, and

comprehensible crisis communication. Together, these studies provide useful points of comparison for PAM because each examines factors that influence whether preparedness knowledge, perceived capability, role awareness, or communication systems become effective action in practice.

Taken together, these bodies of work suggest that preparedness performance depends on more than the existence of plans or completion of training. It depends on whether people have learned relevant actions, perceive sufficient stake and feasibility, receive organizational support, and have practiced coordinated behaviors in ways that can be retrieved under pressure. PAM brings these elements together as a preparedness-specific framework that can be refined through empirical testing.

### 3. The Preparedness Activation Model (PAM)

PAM is organized as a three-level pathway: Learn → Motivate → Activate

The pathway proposes that preparedness performance depends on more than the delivery of information or completion of required training. Individuals and teams must learn role-relevant actions, perceive those actions as meaningful and feasible, and practice them in ways that support retrieval, coordination, and adaptation under pressure.

#### 3.1. *Learn (Andragogy): Building Role-Relevant Understanding*

The learning component focuses on whether preparedness content is understandable, relevant, and connected to the participant's actual role. In this context, learning is not simply awareness that a plan exists or that a procedure has been reviewed. Learning means that individuals understand the specific actions, decision points, communication responsibilities, and handoffs expected of them during an incident or exercise.

Preparedness training should therefore prioritize problem-centered, role-specific learning. Participants do not need to master every section of an emergency plan. They need to understand their first actions, when to escalate, who owns which decisions, what information must be shared, and how their role connects to others. This aligns with adult-learning principles emphasizing relevance, immediate application, and learning connected to real work conditions (Knowles et al., 2015; Morshead, 1965; Senge, 2006; Spector, 2013).

#### 3.2. *Motivate (Vested Interest): Strengthening Perceived Stake, Feasibility, and Support*

The motivation component addresses whether individuals perceive preparedness as personally relevant, feasible, and supported by the organization. Motivation in PAM is not defined as enthusiasm, fear, or compliance. It refers to the degree to which individuals perceive a meaningful stake in the outcome, understand the relevance of the action, believe the action is feasible within their role, and trust that leadership will support preparedness behaviors.

This component draws from vested interest theory, which suggests that people are more likely to act when they perceive an issue as personally consequential and when the perceived benefits of action outweigh barriers or costs (Miller et al., 2013; Sivacek & Crano, 1982). In preparedness settings, motivation may increase when scenarios feel plausible, consequences are clearly explained, roles are bounded, and leadership provides protected time, resources, and visible follow-through. Motivation may weaken when preparedness feels abstract, optional, punitive, or disconnected from actual operational conditions.

### 3.3. Activate: Supporting Practiced Retrieval and Adaptive Execution

The activation component focuses on whether learned and motivated preparedness behaviors can be accessed and coordinated when action is required. Activation is not automatic behavior or rigid compliance with a script. It is the practiced retrieval and adaptive execution of preparedness actions under conditions of uncertainty, time pressure, incomplete information, and competing demands.

Activation is strengthened through repeated decision points, realistic constraints, feedback, decision aids, shared mental models, and communication routines. These design features reduce cognitive load, clarify expectations, and facilitate team coordination during the early stages of an incident or exercise (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Ericsson et al., 1993; Klein, 1998; Salas et al., 2005; Sweller, 1988; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001).

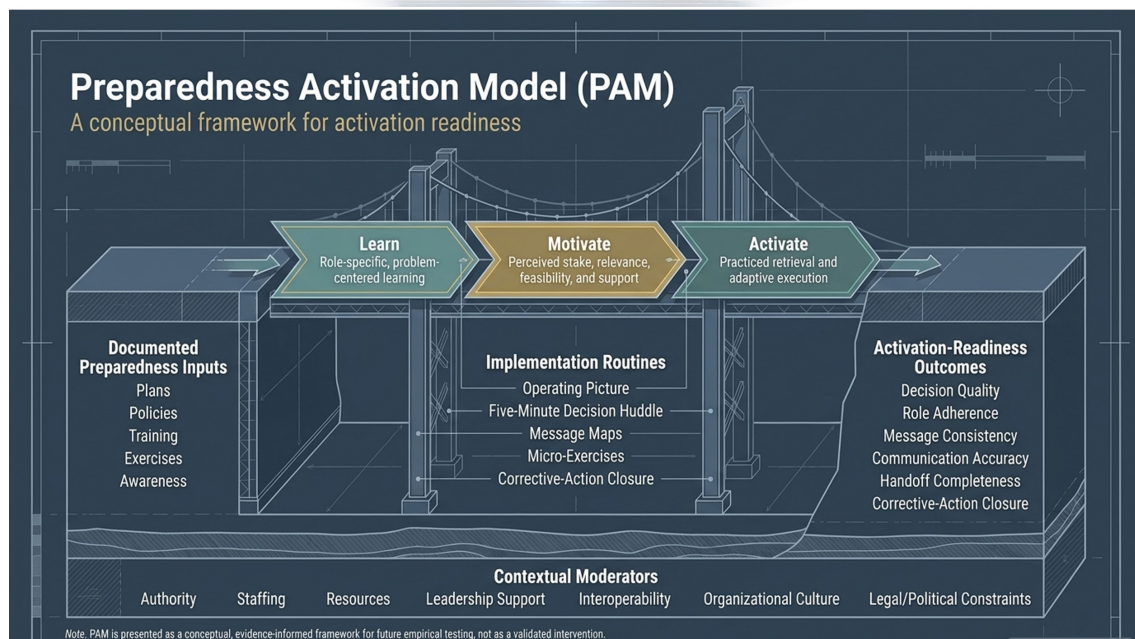
In PAM, activation is evidenced by observable behaviors such as timely decision-making, role-consistent action, use of agreed-upon message structures, documented handoffs, and corrective-action closure.

### 3.4. Pathway Proposition

PAM proposes that preparedness performance is more likely to improve when all three components are present and mutually reinforcing. Learning without motivation may produce awareness without ownership. Motivation without clear learning may produce concern without effective action. Learning and motivation without activation design may still fail under pressure if individuals and teams have not practiced the decisions, communications, and handoffs required during real incidents.

The model, therefore, treats activation readiness as an interaction among individual understanding, perceived stake and feasibility, organizational support, and practiced coordination. If any component is weak, an organization may still appear prepared through plans, training records, and exercise schedules while remaining vulnerable to hesitation, communication drift, role confusion, and incomplete follow-through during actual performance.

The conceptual pathway, implementation routines, activation-readiness outcomes, and contextual moderators are summarized in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of the Preparedness Activation Model (PAM), showing the proposed pathway from documented preparedness inputs to activation-readiness outcomes, with implementation routines and contextual moderators. Source: Developed by the author.

### *3.5. Proposed Relationships and Testable Propositions*

Because PAM is presented as a conceptual framework, its value depends on whether its proposed relationships can be examined empirically. The model proposes that activation readiness is influenced by the interaction of role-relevant learning, vested-interest-based motivation, confidence, organizational support, and activation design. These elements are expected to affect whether individuals and teams can retrieve, coordinate, and adapt preparedness behaviors under pressure.

The propositions below are offered to guide future research and pilot testing. They are not presented as established findings.

#### **Proposition 1: Role-relevant learning and activation readiness**

Preparedness activities that are role-specific, problem-centered, and connected to realistic decision points will be associated with higher activation readiness than preparedness activities focused primarily on general awareness or plan review.

#### **Proposition 2: Vested interest as a mediator between learning and action**

The relationship between preparedness learning and activation readiness will be strengthened when participants perceive the scenario or hazard as personally or organizationally relevant, consequential, and feasible to address within their role.

#### **Proposition 3: Confidence and perceived feasibility**

Participants who report higher confidence in their assigned actions and greater perceived feasibility of those actions will demonstrate stronger role adherence, more timely escalation, and more complete handoffs during exercises or incidents.

#### **Proposition 4: Organizational support as a moderator**

Organizational support, including leadership reinforcement, protected time for practice, clear authority, adequate resources, and visible corrective-action follow-through, will moderate the relationship between individual motivation and activation performance. In other words, motivated personnel may still struggle to perform when organizational conditions do not support action.

#### **Proposition 5: Activation design and practiced retrieval**

Repeated micro-exercises, decision huddles, message maps, and other structured routines will be associated with improved practice retrieval, reflected in more consistent decision-making, clearer communication, stronger role adherence, and more complete handoffs over repeated practice cycles.

#### **Proposition 6: Communication structure and message consistency**

Organizations that use predefined message maps and communication ownership protocols will demonstrate higher message consistency and communication accuracy during exercises or incidents than organizations relying on ad hoc message development.

#### **Proposition 7: Corrective-action closure and sustained engagement**

Visible corrective-action closure after exercises or incidents will be associated with stronger continued participation, greater trust in preparedness activities, and improved activation-readiness outcomes over time.

#### **Proposition 8: Boundary conditions and contextual variation**

The strength of PAM's proposed relationships will vary by organizational context. Factors such as command structure, staffing model, legal authority, interoperability, resource availability, organizational culture, hazard type, and prior exercise maturity may influence whether PAM-informed routines are feasible and effective.

These propositions make PAM testable through mixed-methods research designs. Quantitative indicators may include time-to-decision, decision quality, role adherence, message consistency, com-

munication accuracy, handoff completeness, and corrective-action closure. Qualitative data may include after-action themes, participant interviews, observer notes, and documentation of organizational constraints. Together, these measures can help determine whether PAM-informed routines improve activation readiness beyond traditional plan review, training completion, or tabletop exercises alone.

### *3.6. A Design Aid for Applying PAM: The 3×3 Checklist*

To translate the PAM conceptual pathway into preparedness design, this article proposes a practical 3×3 checklist. The checklist is not presented as a validated instrument or formal assessment tool. Rather, it is offered as a design aid that organizations can use to review preparedness training, exercises, and response routines through the three PAM components: Learn, Motivate, and Activate.

The checklist helps practitioners ask whether a preparedness activity is likely to support activation readiness or merely produce awareness, participation, or documentation.

#### 3.6.1. Learn: Role-Relevant Understanding

1. Is the training role-specific and problem-centered?
2. Does it teach first actions, decision points, and handoffs in plain language?
3. Does it include immediate application through a scenario, decision point, or task-based exercise?

The Learn column examines whether preparedness content is usable. A plan review or training module may increase awareness, but activation readiness requires participants to understand what they are expected to do, when to escalate, who owns related decisions, and how their actions connect with other roles or functions.

#### 3.6.2. Motivate: Perceived Stake, Feasibility, and Support

1. Does the participant understand why the scenario or hazard is relevant to their role or organization?
2. Are the expected actions feasible within real staffing, authority, time, and resource constraints?
3. Does leadership protect time, reinforce expectations, and close the feedback loop after training or exercises?

The Motivate column examines whether preparedness expectations feel meaningful and achievable. Training may fail to influence performance if participants perceive the scenario as unlikely, the actions as unrealistic, or leadership follow-through as inconsistent. Motivation in this context includes perceived stake, confidence, feasibility, and organizational support.

#### 3.6.3. Activate: Practiced Retrieval and Adaptive Execution

1. Are there repeated, timed decision points or micro-exercises that require participants to apply the expected behavior?
2. Does each practice cycle include feedback and at least one visible improvement?
3. Are there tools that reduce cognitive load, such as message maps, decision prompts, role cards, contact lists, or handoff templates?

The Activate column examines whether preparedness behaviors have been practiced in a way that supports retrieval and coordination under pressure. Short, repeated practice cycles can help teams

recognize triggers, make decisions, communicate consistently, and identify friction points before an actual incident.

When used together, the 3×3 checklist helps distinguish between preparedness activities that document completion and preparedness activities that support performance. If the Learn column is weak, participants may not know what to do. If the Motivate column is weak, participants may not see the value, feasibility, or organizational support needed to act. If the Activate column is weak, participants may understand and value preparedness but still struggle to retrieve and coordinate the required behaviors under pressure.

The checklist should be applied with attention to organizational context. A volunteer organization, university, hospital, utility, local government, and private company may define authority, staffing, legal constraints, communication channels, and operating tempo differently. For that reason, the checklist should be treated as a flexible design aid rather than a universal scoring tool. Future pilot testing should examine whether use of the checklist improves measurable outcomes such as role adherence, decision quality, message consistency, handoff completeness, and corrective-action closure.

## 4. Operationalizing PAM: Proposed Implementation Routines

The PAM conceptual model and 3×3 checklist help organizations examine whether preparedness activities support activation readiness. This section translates those concepts into a proposed implementation toolkit. The routines described below are not presented as empirically validated interventions. Rather, they are practical, vendor-neutral routines derived from the model, field experience, and common preparedness failure points involving authority, tempo, communication, handoffs, and follow-through.

The toolkit is designed to be adaptable across settings such as emergency operations centers, incident management teams, school safety teams, hospital command centers, utility operations, business continuity groups, and public-sector crisis management structures. The routines should be adjusted to local authority, staffing, legal requirements, technology, organizational culture, and operating tempo.

### 4.1. One-Page Operating Picture

The one-page Operating Picture is intended to reduce ambiguity at the point of activation. It does not replace an emergency operations plan or continuity plan. Instead, it summarizes the operational information most likely to be needed during the first minutes of an incident or exercise.

At a minimum, the Operating Picture should identify:

1. Who has decision authority and who serves as the alternate;
2. What conditions or thresholds trigger activation, escalation, protective action, or leadership notification;
3. Which functions or partners must be notified;
4. What handoffs are expected across roles, shifts, departments, or operational periods; and
5. Who owns the first internal and external messages.

The Operating Picture supports the Learn component by clarifying first actions and role expectations. It supports the Motivate component by making action feasible and reducing uncertainty. It supports the Activate component by giving participants a retrieval aid that can be practiced during exercises and used during real events.

#### *4.2. Five-Minute Decision Huddle*

The five-minute decision huddle is a short, repeatable communication routine designed to create decision cadence under uncertainty. It is especially useful when information is incomplete, the situation is changing quickly, or multiple functions are waiting for direction.

A basic decision huddle includes five prompts:

1. What is known?
2. What is unknown but operationally important?
3. What decision is required now?
4. Who owns the decision or next action?
5. When is the next check-in?

The purpose is not to force premature certainty. Rather, the huddle helps teams separate facts from assumptions, document interim decisions, assign ownership, and establish a predictable update cycle. To avoid treating speed as the only desired outcome, decision huddles should be evaluated alongside balancing indicators such as decision quality, safety, role adherence, handoff completeness, and communication accuracy.

#### *4.3. Plain-Language Message Maps*

Message maps are proposed as a routine for reducing communication drift. During complex incidents, different offices, agencies, or partners may issue updates based on different assumptions, language, timing, or approval pathways. Message maps help establish a shared structure before messages are drafted under pressure.

Four recurring message types are useful across many incidents:

1. Emergency Notification: What happened and what people should do now;
2. Status Update: What is known, what is not yet known, and when the next update will be provided;
3. Care/Resources: Where people can go, who they can contact, and what supports are available; and
4. All-Clear/Next Steps: What has been resolved, what remains in place, and what changes now.

Message maps should be adapted to local communication channels, approval structures, language-access needs, and public information responsibilities (Yamah & Folorunsho, 2026). Their value is not in scripting every possible emergency but in creating predictable categories and plain-language structure so that messages can be drafted quickly, reviewed consistently, and understood by intended audiences.

#### *4.4. Micro-Exercises*

Micro-exercises are short, role-specific practice cycles lasting approximately 10–15 minutes. They can be embedded into existing meetings, shift briefings, supervisory check-ins, training days, or continuity planning sessions. The goal is to practice one decision pathway or coordination problem at a time rather than waiting for a full-scale exercise.

A micro-exercise may ask participants to answer:

1. What has happened?
2. Does this meet an activation or escalation threshold?
3. Who decides?

4. What message must be sent first?
5. What handoff or resource request is required?
6. What is one improvement to address before the next cycle?

Micro-exercises support practiced retrieval and adaptive execution because they create repeated exposure to realistic decision points. They also make preparedness more feasible for organizations with limited time, staffing, or funding. However, they should not replace larger exercises required by regulation, accreditation, grant requirements, or organizational policy. Instead, they can help prepare participants to perform more effectively during larger exercises and real incidents.

#### *4.5. Minimal Metrics*

Minimal metrics are proposed to help organizations determine whether activation readiness is improving without creating an overly burdensome measurement program. These metrics should be treated as early indicators rather than definitive proof of effectiveness.

Three core metrics are proposed:

1. Time-to-decision: The time between incident recognition or scenario inject and a documented go/no-go decision, including the decision owner and rationale;
2. Message consistency: The degree to which messages across functions or channels use aligned instructions, terminology, timing, and next-update expectations; and
3. Closure: The percentage of corrective actions that are assigned, completed, verified, and communicated back to participants or stakeholders.

Because speed alone can produce premature or poor decisions, these metrics should be paired with balancing indicators. Examples include decision quality, safety considerations, role adherence, handoff completeness, communication accuracy, resource feasibility, and corrective-action completion. For local use, organizations should define scoring criteria, observation periods, data sources, and review procedures before applying the metrics.

Together, these implementation routines translate PAM into practical action. The Operating Picture clarifies authority and triggers. The decision huddle establishes tempo. Message maps improve language discipline. Micro-exercises build practiced retrieval. Minimal metrics support learning and accountability. Used together, they provide a proposed pathway for moving from documented preparedness toward more observable and measurable activation readiness.

#### *4.6. Proposed Implementation Pathway: A 30–60–90 Day Protocol*

The following 30–60–90-day pathway is proposed as an implementation protocol for organizations seeking to apply PAM in practice. It should not be interpreted as an established or empirically validated intervention. Rather, it offers a structured starting point that can be adapted to local context, resources, authority structures, staffing, legal requirements, and operational tempo.

The pathway is intentionally incremental. Instead of requiring a major new program, the protocol begins with one or two high-frequency scenarios, a limited number of participating functions, and short practice cycles. This approach allows organizations to test PAM routines, identify friction points, and refine implementation before expanding the model more broadly.

##### *4.6.1. Days 1–30: Build Clarity and Establish a Baseline*

During the first 30 days, the organization should identify one to three high-frequency or high-consequence scenarios relevant to its operating environment. Examples may include severe weather

disruption, cyber outage, medical surge, hazardous materials incident, workplace violence or threat, utility failure, transportation disruption, or community event surge.

For each selected scenario, the organization should draft a one-page Operating Picture that identifies decision authority, alternates, activation thresholds, required notifications, first-message ownership, and key handoffs. The organization should also develop draft message maps for the most likely communication needs.

During this phase, baseline observations should be collected where feasible. These may include current time-to-decision during an exercise or tabletop scenario, consistency of messages across functions, role clarity, handoff completeness, and whether corrective actions from prior exercises were assigned and closed. This baseline should be used for local learning rather than judgment or comparison across organizations.

#### 4.6.2. Days 31–60: Practice Activation Routines

During the second phase, the organization should begin short, repeated practice cycles using the Operating Picture, decision huddle, and message maps. One or two micro-exercises per month may be sufficient for initial testing. These exercises should be brief, role-specific, and embedded into existing meetings, shift briefings, training sessions, or emergency management planning routines.

Each micro-exercise should include a realistic decision point, a time constraint, and a required communication or handoff action. Participants should identify what is known, what remains uncertain, who has authority, what decision is required, who owns the next action, and when the next check-in should occur.

At the end of each practice cycle, the organization should conduct a short debrief and identify one improvement. Examples may include clarifying an activation threshold, revising a contact list, adjusting a message map, identifying an alternate decision-maker, or improving a handoff process. A brief “what changed” note should be shared with participants to reinforce learning and demonstrate follow-through.

#### 4.6.3. Days 61–90: Measure, Refine, and Normalize

During the third phase, the organization should continue micro-exercises while beginning to compare results against the initial baseline. The purpose is not to prove that PAM is effective after 90 days, but to assess whether the implementation routines are improving clarity, coordination, and consistency.

Suggested measures include time-to-decision, decision quality, message consistency, communication accuracy, role adherence, handoff completeness, and corrective-action closure. Organizations should define scoring criteria, data sources, observation periods, and review procedures before relying on these measures for evaluation.

At the end of the 90-day period, the organization should produce a brief activation-readiness summary. This summary may include what was tested, what improved, what remained unclear, which corrective actions were completed, and which scenarios or functions should be included in the next cycle. The summary should also identify boundary conditions that affected implementation, such as staffing, authority, legal requirements, technology, interoperability, leadership availability, or competing operational demands.

The 30–60–90-day pathway is designed to make PAM feasible for organizations with limited time and resources. Its value lies in creating a disciplined cycle of practice, feedback, and visible improvement. Future empirical testing should examine whether this pathway improves activation-readiness outcomes when compared with standard plan review, traditional training, or tabletop exercises alone.

## 5. Evaluation Framework: Measuring Activation Readiness Without Overmeasurement

PAM is intended for local adaptation and empirical testing. The evaluation framework proposed here is designed to help organizations assess whether activation readiness is improving without creating an overly burdensome measurement system. The purpose is not to prove perfect preparedness, but to determine whether decision-making, communication, role execution, handoffs, and corrective-action closure become more consistent over repeated exercises or incidents.

The evaluation framework should be applied before and after the implementation of PAM routines. At a minimum, organizations should collect baseline observations during an existing tabletop exercise, functional exercise, planned drill, or realistic discussion-based scenario. After implementing the Operating Picture, decision huddle, message maps, micro-exercises, and corrective-action process, the same or similar scenario conditions should be repeated to assess change over time.

### 5.1. Core Indicators

The first core indicator is time-to-decision. This may be calculated as the time between incident recognition or scenario inject and a documented go/no-go decision. Documentation should include who made the decision, what information was available, what uncertainty remained, and why the decision was made. Time-to-decision should not be interpreted as inherently positive. Faster decisions may be premature, unsafe, poorly coordinated, or based on incomplete assumptions. For that reason, time-to-decision should always be reviewed alongside decision quality, safety considerations, role adherence, and communication accuracy.

The second core indicator is message consistency. This may be assessed by comparing internal and external messages across offices, agencies, departments, or communication channels during a defined observation period. Reviewers should examine whether messages use aligned instructions, terminology, status information, protective actions, and next-update times. Message consistency may be scored using a simple rubric, such as fully aligned, partially aligned, or inconsistent. The data sources may include emergency notifications, emails, website updates, public information releases, social media posts, call-center scripts, or internal leadership updates.

The third core indicator is corrective-action closure. This may be calculated as the percentage of after-action items that are assigned to an owner, given a due date, completed, verified, and communicated back to relevant participants or stakeholders. Closure should not only mean that an item was entered into a tracking document. It should mean that the organization completed the action, confirmed the change, and communicated what changed as a result of the exercise, incident, or after-action process.

### 5.2. Balancing Indicators

Because a narrow focus on speed or completion may distort behavior, PAM evaluation should include balancing indicators. Suggested balancing indicators include:

1. Decision quality: whether the decision was appropriate based on available information, risk, authority, and operational conditions;
2. Role adherence: whether participants acted within assigned roles or clearly documented deviations;
3. Handoff completeness: whether unresolved issues, assigned actions, resource needs, and next steps were transferred accurately;
4. Communication accuracy: whether messages were factually correct, timely, plain-language, and appropriate for the audience;

5. Safety and risk control: whether decisions reduced risk without creating avoidable secondary hazards; and
6. Corrective-action completion: whether identified improvements were implemented and sustained over time.

These indicators may be scored by trained observers during exercises, reviewed through after-action documentation, or assessed through structured debriefs. To improve reliability, organizations should define scoring criteria before the exercise, identify who will collect data, determine the observation period, and use the same criteria across repeated practice cycles.

### *5.3. Suggested Pilot-Study Design*

Future research should test PAM using a pilot-study design. A practical design could include baseline and post-intervention measurements across repeated exercises. For example, an organization could conduct an initial tabletop or functional exercise using its existing preparedness process, record baseline measures, implement PAM routines over a 30–60–90-day period, and then conduct a comparable follow-up exercise.

Where feasible, researchers could compare units or organizations using PAM routines with similar units or organizations using standard plan review, traditional training, or tabletop exercises alone. A mixed-methods approach would be appropriate. Quantitative measures could include time-to-decision, message consistency scores, role adherence, handoff completeness, and corrective-action closure. Qualitative data could include after-action themes, participant interviews, observer notes, and documented barriers to implementation.

Repeated exercises would strengthen the design by showing whether changes are sustained beyond a single event. Researchers should also document contextual factors that may affect results, including staffing levels, leadership support, authority structures, legal requirements, technology systems, organizational culture, and prior exercise experience.

The evaluation framework should be understood as proposed rather than validated. Its purpose is to support local learning and future empirical testing. If PAM is to become a reliable cross-sector preparedness framework, future studies should examine whether its routines improve activation-readiness outcomes across different settings, incident types, organizational structures, and resource environments.

## **6. Discussion: Implications, Boundary Conditions, and Future Development**

PAM's primary contribution is its effort to reframe preparedness as a performance system rather than a documentation system. Many organizations invest substantial effort in plans, policies, technology platforms, training completion, and exercise schedules. These activities remain important, but they do not necessarily demonstrate whether individuals and teams can retrieve, coordinate, and adapt preparedness behaviors under pressure. PAM offers a conceptual framework for examining why awareness and compliance may coexist with hesitation, role confusion, communication drift, and incomplete follow-through during incidents and exercises.

The model's practical value is that it connects preparedness theory to observable routines. Adult learning helps explain why training should be role-specific, problem-centered, and connected to real work. Vested-interest-based motivation helps explain why individuals may be more likely to engage when they perceive personal or organizational stake, relevance, feasibility, and support. Activation design helps explain how practiced retrieval, decision aids, feedback loops, shared mental models, and communication routines may support performance under stress. Together, these elements provide a structured way to examine the preparedness-performance gap.

At the same time, PAM should not be interpreted as a validated intervention or universal preparedness standard. The model is proposed as a conceptual, evidence-informed framework developed through doctoral research, practitioner experience, field application, and synthesis of supporting literature. It has not yet been tested across multiple organizations, sectors, or incident types. The implementation routines and evaluation indicators described in this article should therefore be understood as proposed tools for local adaptation and pilot testing, not as proven measures of effectiveness.

Several boundary conditions may influence how PAM functions in practice. Centralized command systems may be able to implement decision huddles and message maps differently than decentralized or volunteer-based organizations. Universities, hospitals, utilities, local governments, private companies, and nongovernmental organizations operate under different legal authorities, staffing models, risk tolerances, accreditation requirements, technology systems, and communication expectations. Political context, union agreements, privacy obligations, public information laws, resource availability, and interoperability constraints may also shape whether activation routines are feasible or effective. These differences do not make PAM irrelevant across sectors, but they do require local adaptation and careful evaluation.

PAM also expands the activation problem beyond individual motivation. Although motivation is a central bridge between learning and action, motivated personnel may still be unable to perform if they lack authority, staffing, resources, information access, interoperable systems, or leadership support. Organizational culture also matters. If personnel do not trust that concerns will be heard, that after-action findings will be addressed, or that leaders will protect time for preparedness, participation may decline even when training content is well designed. For this reason, PAM treats activation readiness as an interaction among individual learning, perceived stake, organizational support, and system conditions.

The model has several limitations. First, the supporting literature was selected to inform conceptual development and was not identified through a systematic review. Second, the model reflects practitioner-author interpretation, which may introduce bias based on professional context and field experience. Third, the article does not provide comparative evidence showing that PAM improves outcomes more effectively than established models such as COM-B, the Theory of Planned Behavior, implementation intentions, training-transfer models, or the Protective Action Decision Model. Fourth, the proposed metrics require further refinement, testing, and reliability assessment before they can be used as standardized measures. Fifth, the cross-sector relevance of PAM remains a hypothesis rather than an empirically established finding.

Future research should test PAM through pilot studies that include baseline and post-intervention measurement, repeated exercises, comparison groups where feasible, and qualitative after-action analysis. Such studies should examine whether PAM routines are associated with improvements in decision quality, role adherence, message consistency, handoff completeness, communication accuracy, and corrective-action closure. Future work should also examine whether PAM operates differently across organizational structures, hazard types, resource environments, and levels of prior preparedness maturity.

Despite these limitations, PAM offers a practical starting point for both researchers and practitioners. For practitioners, the framework provides a low-cost way to examine whether preparedness activities support actual performance. For researchers, the model offers defined constructs, proposed pathways, implementation routines, and measurable outcomes that can be tested and refined. The goal is not to replace existing behavioral or preparedness models, but to provide a specific framework for studying and improving activation readiness under pressure.

## 7. Conclusions

Preparedness is not demonstrated by the existence of a plan, the completion of a training module, or the scheduling of an exercise alone. It is demonstrated when individuals and teams can apply relevant knowledge, make timely and appropriate decisions, communicate consistently, perform role-related actions, complete handoffs, and close corrective actions under conditions of uncertainty and pressure.

The Preparedness Activation Model (PAM) is proposed as a conceptual, evidence-informed framework for examining the gap between documented preparedness and operational performance. By linking adult learning, vested-interest-based motivation, and activation design, PAM offers a structured way to consider how organizations may strengthen activation readiness. The model also distinguishes between the conceptual pathway, proposed implementation routines, and an evaluation framework that can be adapted for local testing.

PAM should not be interpreted as a validated intervention or universal standard. Its practical value lies in offering a way to organize preparedness improvement around role-relevant learning, perceived stake and feasibility, organizational support, practiced retrieval, disciplined communication, and measurable follow-through. Future research should test the model across varied sectors, organizational structures, and incident types to determine whether PAM-informed routines improve decision quality, message consistency, role adherence, handoff completeness, communication accuracy, and corrective-action closure.

In this form, PAM is best understood as a starting point for further study and practical refinement. Its purpose is to help organizations move beyond preparedness as documentation and toward preparedness as observable, coordinated, and measurable performance under pressure.

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