Crisis Management: Developing an Emergency Response Plan



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In 2005, the devastation in the wake of hurricane Katrina was a tragic example of the consequences of unpreparedness. No one was ready for what was to come. This storm was also a wake-up call for industry. Emergencies can happen anywhere and at any time and companies need to have the proper planning in place to confront the potential dangers.

A plan to deal with major emergencies is an important element of a good OHS program. Besides planning for the likely emergencies and then mapping out what to do when the unthinkable happens, an emergency response plan can also ensure that workers respond in the appropriate manner when an emergency happens, saving time, money, resources and, ultimately, lives. That’s why every corporation should have one.

Crisis management is a comprehensive area of health and safety that encompasses all aspects of a business and involves planning, organizing, leading and controlling assets and activities in the critical periods immediately before, during and after a catastrophe to reduce its impact on the company. Thus, crisis management encompasses developing plans to both prepare for and respond to an emergency in the appropriate fashion and keep the business functioning after a crisis, i.e, a business continuity plan. (This article focuses on emergency

response plans.)

In a crisis, there should be extensive and thorough communication between all parts of the company. However, the various departments often develop their own emergency response plans with little coordination among them, resulting in the lack of an overall, governing program. So how does one develop a comprehensive and coordinated emergency response plan’

Who Should Develop the Plan’

The overall responsibility for developing the emergency response plan should be assigned to one person who’ll coordinate the appropriate personnel and resources and address issues in a systematic and thorough fashion. Because this person will have to interact with staff from all levels of the company, he or she must have the appropriate authority to ensure success.

The designated person should form a team that will determine the possible emergencies the company could face. This team should include representatives from all aspects of the company—from senior management, human resources, health and safety, security, operations, logistics, finance, information technology/services, facilities and legal. Also consider including outside members, such as insurance brokers, insurance carrier safety professionals and consultants. And because most emergencies will likely include a public agency such as the police or fire department, consider including them in your planning, too.

What’s an Emergency’

The first question the team should ask is what constitutes an emergency for our company’ Don’t make the mistake of just copying another company’s emergency response plan without considering this question. These plans need to be customized for each company and its various operations. A crisis for one division of a company may not be a crisis for another. For

example, geography, weather and climate can all be important determinants of what constitutes a crisis in one area and not in another. So although hurricanes are a real concern in Louisiana, they're not in Edmonton, Alberta.

In short, an emergency can be defined as any incident that that can have an adverse effect on a company's workers, operations and overall financial condition. Examples of emergencies include severe weather, safety incidents, environmental incidents, fires, explosions, floods and workplace violence.

Once the team identifies the potential emergencies, it should assess them according to:

> Severity, such as would they result in first aid injuries, fatalities, catastrophic failure of operations, massive destruction of property, etc.;

> Probability—that is, how likely they are to occur; and

> Frequency—that is, how often they could occur, such as once a year, once a month, daily, etc.

Based on this assessment, the team can use a matrix to rank each possible emergency according to whether it's a high, medium or low risk. The team should then develop an emergency response plan that addresses the high and medium risk emergencies. And it should determine which, if any, low risk emergencies to cover. For example, if your workplace is located in an area that could theoretically be hit by a tornado but one hasn't struck there in over 50 years, you might opt to exclude tornado preparedness from your emergency plan.

Components of the Plan

After the team has determined which types of emergencies the plan will cover, it should look at the emergency preparedness

and response measures already in place, such as a properly designed, well-maintained sprinkler system, fire alarms and extinguishers, clearly marked emergency exits, emergency lighting, etc. Also consider the emergency procedures already in place, such as evacuation procedures.

Once the team has a handle on the existing emergency measures and procedures, it can identify gaps and take steps to fill them, such as buying necessary emergency response equipment and developing new emergency response procedures. For example, if a chemical spill is a high risk emergency for your workplace, ensure that the workplace has the proper PPE, materials and supplies to clean up or contain the spill.

Put It in Writing

The final emergency response plan should be in writing and address each kind of emergency identified by the team as high or medium risk. It must also clearly define everyone’s roles and responsibilities to prevent chaos when an actual emergency occurs. Other items to consider including in an emergency response plan are:

- An incident command system;
- Emergency operations centre;
- Key contact names and numbers;
- Evacuation procedures;
- Control measures and response actions required for specified events;
- Emergency response team members;
- Search and rescue procedures;
- Detailed diagrams including access roads, buildings, surrounding structures, utility lines, gas shut off points and/or valves, etc.;
- Procedures for working with government agencies;
- Communication procedures before, during and after a crisis;
- Location of all emergency response equipment and

supplies;
- Worker training on the emergency response plan, including specialized training for members of emergency response team; and
- Counseling for workers following a crisis.

Training & Emergency Drills

As noted above, all staff should be trained on the emergency response plan and given refresher training on a regular basis. And members of the emergency response team may need additional training. The team should regularly review the written plan, particularly contact names and phone numbers, as operations change, people leave and new kinds of emergencies may emerge.

The team should also ensure that practice exercises or emergency drills are conducted to make sure that the plan works as intended. Simulations also ensure personnel respond well in a crisis. Involve public agencies such as fire and police departments in these exercises as their input is essential. When a plan is tested either during a simulation or real-life crisis, you might discover deficiencies. The team should then meet to identify corrective actions to improve the plan and address these gaps.

Bottom Line

In conclusion, crisis management is complex and requires a multidisciplinary approach. Although developing an emergency response plan takes time, it should include a thorough evaluation that identifies the likely emergencies and provide an appropriate framework for preparing for and responding to them. Proper planning and effective response can significantly minimize the impact of a crisis on any business. Like the Girl Guides of Canada say, “Be prepared!”

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