Emergency Response Refreshers Should Test Decisions, Not Memory



Picture a warehouse at the end of a busy afternoon shift. An alarm sounds while a contractor is repairing a loading-door mechanism. A visitor is in the shipping office, a forklift operator is working at the far end of the building, and the usual assembly area is exposed to smoke drifting across the parking lot. The floor supervisor reaches for the radio, only to discover that the battery is dead.

Everyone in this picture may have completed emergency response training. The company may have a current evacuation map, an inspection record for the alarm system and a signed attendance sheet from its last drill. None of those documents answers the immediate questions. Who knows the alternate route? Who accounts for the visitor? Who is authorized to move people away from the assembly area? And how does the supervisor communicate that decision without a working radio?

This is where emergency preparedness becomes more demanding than annual compliance. Workers don’t need to recite a procedure under ideal conditions. They need to recognize what is happening, understand their own responsibilities and act safely when the workplace stops behaving as expected.

For Canadian OHS leaders, the purpose of a refresher should be to discover what their people can actually do, not to confirm

that they've heard the same instructions again. That requires a different kind of preparation from the trainer and a different kind of attention from management.

Familiarity can look remarkably like preparedness

Most workplaces make a reasonable effort to introduce emergency procedures during orientation. Employees are shown exits, told where to assemble and given instructions about alarms, first aid and reporting. Some workplaces add a yearly evacuation drill or an online refresher. These measures matter. But as the routine becomes familiar, a subtle problem develops: people start learning the exercise rather than the response.

The alarm is expected. The nearest exit is open. Supervisors are present, the weather cooperates and the designated wardens know the date. People walk outside, gather in a convenient location and return to work. The record shows the drill was completed, often with a time attached. It may reveal very little about whether the organization could manage an emergency on a night shift, during a power failure or when its normal route is unusable.

An efficient evacuation is not necessarily an effective emergency response. Speed matters only after the organization has established that people received the warning, chose a safe route, reached a safe location and were accounted for. A fast drill that leaves one worker unlocated is not a success because everyone else reached the parking lot quickly.

That distinction is particularly important in workplaces with seasonal staff, contractors, rotating crews or frequent changes to equipment and layout. The people who attended the last refresher may not be the people who have to make the

first decision next time.

Train for the emergency your workplace could actually have

A generic fire drill is a poor substitute for a site-specific emergency program. The hazards in a hospital, a manufacturing plant, a distribution centre and a remote maintenance operation are not interchangeable. Nor are the responses. A fire may require evacuation, while an external chemical release may call for sheltering in place. A worker injured in a confined space requires a planned rescue response, not a well-intentioned attempt by an untrained colleague to climb in after them.

Start with the workplace’s risk assessment and the emergencies it identifies as credible. Then ask what workers would need to notice, decide and do in the first few minutes. That should shape the refresher more than the availability of a standard slide deck. Where there are several different possible responses, test whether workers can distinguish them under pressure, including the difference between withdrawing, evacuating and sheltering in place. A single alarm tone with vague instructions may be a bigger weakness than any individual worker’s memory.

Consider a food-processing facility where an ammonia alarm might indicate a refrigeration-system release. Operators need to understand the alarm and immediate protective actions. Maintenance personnel need to know their limits and assigned isolation procedures. Supervisors need to direct people away from affected areas and communicate with emergency services. The person at reception may have a completely different responsibility: preventing visitors from entering and giving responders accurate access information. Teaching everyone the same fifteen-minute presentation doesn’t establish that these

roles fit together.

A strong refresher separates two levels of competence. Every worker needs to know how to recognize an emergency, raise the alarm, protect themselves and follow directions. People assigned specialized duties need additional, role-specific instruction and practice. These may include wardens, first aid attendants, incident commanders, spill responders or qualified rescue personnel. An employer shouldn’t assume that a general orientation qualifies someone to undertake a hazardous rescue or fire-suppression task.

The first decision may be whether the original plan still applies

Emergencies are dynamic. Smoke can make an exit unusable. Floodwater can cut off a road. A power loss can disable a communication system. A chemical plume can move toward the designated muster point. The emergency procedure should anticipate reasonable changes, but no document can describe every sequence of events.

This is why refreshers must teach decision boundaries, not invite improvisation without limits. Workers should know when to stop work immediately, when to withdraw, whom to notify and what alternative instructions they are permitted to follow. Supervisors and emergency coordinators need a clearer understanding of who can alter a route or assembly location, how that change will be communicated and when outside responders take control.

Take the familiar instruction to use the nearest exit. It’s useful until that exit is blocked by smoke or a fallen object. Training should make the alternative concrete: know more than

one safe route when the building and hazard assessment permit it, check conditions before proceeding, and use the established emergency communication process rather than following others blindly into danger.

The same applies to shelter-in-place decisions. A worker who has only practised leaving the building may respond incorrectly to an external toxic release or a dangerous event outside. A refresher should explain how different alarm messages are distinguished and what actions they require. If employees can’t tell the difference, the organization has a communication problem before the emergency even begins.

Train the handoffs, because emergencies don’t respect job descriptions

The most revealing part of a drill often occurs between people rather than within a single role. A floor warden reports that a room is clear, but who receives the information? A contractor tells a supervisor that an employee was working above the ceiling, but who updates the accountability record? A first aid attendant needs an ambulance at a secondary entrance, yet the only person with gate access has evacuated to another location.

Each individual may believe they’ve completed their assignment. The overall response still fails if information stops at the handoff. During a refresher, have observers follow the information itself: where it starts, who receives it, what decision follows and whether the next person knows what changed. This can expose missing roles that never appear in a conventional attendance report.

For that reason, meaningful refreshers need to include the

people commonly left out of the exercise. Night and weekend shifts may have fewer supervisors. Temporary workers may not know local terminology. Contractors may use a different sign-in system. Visitors may have no reliable way to recognize alarms, especially in noisy or unfamiliar environments. Workers with disabilities may require planned assistance, accessible communication or a different evacuation method. These arrangements must be developed with the affected people, kept current and practised appropriately, without placing them at unnecessary risk.

An organization also needs to resolve who maintains a reliable record of who is present. A spreadsheet of permanent employees isn’t enough if drivers, cleaners, customers or maintenance contractors are on site. Nor is a successful head count useful if nobody knows how to communicate an unaccounted-for person to emergency services.

Here’s a practical test for the next refresher: ask the person responsible for accountability how they would identify and report a missing contractor during a communications outage. If the answer depends on a particular manager being available, the system has a single point of failure.

Build a drill that can safely fail

Realism doesn’t mean surprising workers with uncontrolled danger. It means designing an exercise around a plausible disruption and observing what happens. Before the drill begins, establish its objectives, safety limits, participants, observers and a clear method for stopping the exercise. Don’t block an actual emergency exit, disable a life-safety system or simulate hazardous conditions in ways that create a real exposure.

A tabletop exercise may be the safest way to test an executive decision, a complex hazardous-substance scenario or the loss of a critical system. A functional exercise can test notification, command and accountability without moving everyone off site. A controlled evacuation drill can assess routes and movement. These methods complement each other; one format isn’t adequate for every hazard.

The scenario should be demanding enough to reveal assumptions. Perhaps the primary assembly area is unavailable, a designated warden is absent or the incident occurs before the normal supervisor arrives. Give participants information in stages, as they would receive it during a real event. Don’t award success for guessing a hidden script. Assess whether they recognized a change, made a defensible decision and communicated it clearly.

And don’t treat every pause as failure. A worker who refuses to enter an unsafe area and calls for qualified responders may demonstrate excellent emergency judgment, even if that decision slows the exercise. The purpose is a safe and coordinated outcome, not theatrical speed.

Measure what matters after the alarm

A recorded evacuation time is easy to compare from year to year, which explains its appeal. But it can distract from the weaknesses that have the greatest consequences. A better evaluation asks whether everyone recognized the alert, whether people knew which response applied, whether alternate communication worked, whether vulnerable people were supported and whether accountability was accurate.

Observers should pay attention to ordinary details. Did a supervisor give contradictory directions? Did a locked gate

delay access? Was the muster point large enough and outside the hazard? Did anyone re-enter without authorization? Was the incident command location safe and known to the people who needed it? Did emergency responders receive usable information?

Document what happened in plain language, including the conditions under which the exercise took place. Distinguish an individual training gap from a system defect. If a new employee couldn’t find the assembly point, improved orientation may help. If three departments used different accountability lists, another online course won’t repair the coordination failure.

The debrief is where many programs lose their value. People identify problems, the report is filed and the next drill begins with the same weaknesses. Instead, give each corrective action an owner, a due date and an effective verification step. Changes to a route map should be communicated to workers. A revised notification system should be tested. Additional training should include the people whose duties changed.

Until those actions are completed and checked, the drill has identified risk without demonstrating that the risk has been reduced. The record of completion should not be mistaken for evidence that the underlying problem has disappeared.

Canadian legal requirements are specific, not interchangeable

Across Canada, emergency preparedness obligations arise through occupational health and safety legislation, fire codes and requirements tied to particular hazards or industries.

Employers should verify which rules apply to each site rather than assume a single national refresher frequency.

British Columbia’s Occupational Health and Safety Regulation, sections 4.13 to 4.16, addresses emergency risk assessments, evacuation and rescue procedures, annual emergency drills and worker instruction. The regulation also includes more specific requirements for certain hazards. For emergencies involving hazardous substances, section 5.104 requires training and drills, including drills at least annually and after significant changes to the emergency response plan, along with prescribed drill records retained for five years. These are distinct provisions and shouldn’t be collapsed into a generic annual-training rule.

Alberta’s OHS Code, Part 7, requires an emergency response plan for situations that may require rescue or evacuation. Affected workers must be involved in its development, and the plan must be kept current. Designated rescue and evacuation workers must receive site-appropriate training, including simulated exercises repeated at intervals that maintain competence. The Code doesn’t establish one universal yearly interval for every such exercise.

In Ontario, Fire Code requirements depend on the building and occupancy. Where section 2.8 applies, fire safety plans address emergency procedures, supervisory staff responsibilities, training and drills. The code specifies different drill frequencies for different occupancies, so a warehouse, school and care facility should not be treated as though they share the same minimum schedule.

Those examples don’t exhaust Canadian requirements. They illustrate why a useful refresher begins with a jurisdiction-specific compliance check, then goes further to establish that the response works. CCOHS recommends testing plans through drills or exercises, reviewing shortcomings promptly and updating procedures when infrastructure, processes, materials

or key personnel change.

A better refresher starts before the training session

OHS managers can improve the next cycle without building a full-scale exercise program overnight. Start by examining the last drill report and asking whether its corrective actions were actually completed. Speak with supervisors on different shifts. Walk the alternate routes. Compare the personnel sign-in process with the accountability method in the plan. Check whether the first aid coverage, emergency contact list and response roles match the workforce that is on site today.

Then choose one credible weakness to test. An absent warden. An alternate evacuation route. A visitor who isn’t on the usual roster. A loss of phone service. Don’t introduce all of them into the first exercise. Controlled complexity gives observers a better chance of seeing what needs to improve and gives participants a genuine opportunity to practise their responsibilities.

Training should follow the exercise as well as precede it. When workers see why an assumption failed, a short, targeted refresher becomes relevant. They remember the lesson because it solves a problem they encountered, not because it appeared on slide twelve.

Leadership has a distinct role here. A drill that reveals an unsafe gate arrangement, inadequate staffing or a defective alarm interface may require investment or operational change. If the response is to tell workers to pay closer attention, management has missed the evidence in front of it. The people running the drill should be able to escalate a structural problem without having to disguise it as an individual training deficiency. Otherwise the organization will

repeatedly retrain workers to work around a defect that leadership has the authority to fix.

The test is whether the organization learns

Emergency preparedness is one of the few safety disciplines in which the best result is never having to use the response under real conditions. That makes exercises essential, but it also creates an opportunity for false confidence. The records may be tidy, training may be current and the annual drill may be finished without the organization knowing how its people will perform when the expected route closes or a key person isn’t there.

A serious refresher makes that uncertainty visible. It tests the connections between workers, supervisors, contractors, equipment and emergency responders. It shows which decisions are understood, which assumptions don’t hold and which corrective actions management must own.

The most useful question after the next drill isn’t how quickly everyone got out. It’s what the exercise taught the organization that it didn’t know before, and whether that lesson changed anything.