Safety First

Emergency Response Plan—It's Not an Option, It's the Law by Kelli Gabel

"Not only are emergency response plans (ERPs) the law, but if implemented correctly, they can greatly reduce the extent of injuries and limit the degree of damage done to property, material and equipment."

Nobody expects an emergency or disaster—especially one that affects them, their employees, and their business personally. Yet the simple truth is that emergencies and disasters can strike anyone, anytime, and anywhere. You and your employees could be forced to evacuate your building when you least expect it or you may be faced with a hazard that is stagnant for weeks until it eventually becomes a full blown disaster. Whatever the case may be, disasters and emergencies are different for each workplace and in order to effectively defend your business against these crises; you must have a working emergency response plan (ERP) in place.

WHAT IS AN EMERCENCY RESPONSE PLAN (ERP)?

An ERP describes the procedures employees should take to ensure their safety in case of an emergency or disaster. ERPs are the law according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). OSHA requires facilities with over ten employees to have a written emergency plan. In facilities that employ fewer than ten, the plan can be communicated orally.

THE REASONS FOR AN ERP

Not only are ERPs the law, but if implemented correctly, they can greatly reduce the extent of injuries and limit the degree of damage done to property, material and equipment. When considering emergency management, avoid dwelling on the negative effects of an emergency (deaths, fines or criminal prosecution) and emphasize the positive aspects of preparedness. For example:

- It helps companies fulfill their moral responsibility to protect employees, the community and the environment.
- It facilitates compliance with regulatory requirements of federal, state and local agencies.
- It enhances a company's ability to recover from financial losses, regulatory fines, loss of market share, damages to equipment or products, or business interruption.
- It reduces exposure to civil or criminal liability in the event of an incident.
- It enhances a company's image and credibility with employees, customers, suppliers and the community.
- It may reduce your insurance premiums.

WHAT IS A WORKPLACE EMERGENCY?

A workplace emergency is an unforeseen situation that threatens your employees, customers or the public; disrupts or shuts down your operations; or causes physical or environmental damage. Emergencies include the following:

- Personal Injuries
- Fires
- Explosions
- Chemical Spills
- Vandalism
- Toxic Gas Releases
- Floods and Tornadoes
- Riots and Terrorist Activities
- Loss of Key Supplier or Customer

DESIGNING AN ERP

The best way is to prepare to respond to an emergency before it happens. Few people can think clearly and logically in a crisis, so it is important to do so in advance, when you have time to be thorough. Brainstorm and address any potential disaster or emergency in your workplace. Ask yourself what you would do if the worst happened. For example, what would you do if a fire broke out or a forklift's gas tank leaked? Once you have identified potential emergencies, consider how they would affect you and your workers and how you would respond. Based on this assessment, ERPs should be written for each potential emergency or disaster.

Each ERP should be tailored to meet your plant's needs, but at a minimum, each plan should include these basics:

- **Floor plans or workplace maps:**
  - ❍ Emergency escape procedures and route assignments, such as floor plans, workplace maps, and safe or refuge areas. Each should clearly show the emergency escape routes and safe area.
- **Employee Response to Specific Emergencies:**
  - ❍ The ERP should be reviewed by all employees at least on an annual basis or when these actions occur:
    - ■ After each training drill or exercise.
    - ■ After each emergency.
    - ■ When personnel or their responsibilities change.
    - ■ When the layout or design of the facility changes.
    - ■ When policies or procedures change.
  - ❍ Each ERP should be noted if any changes from the initial implementation have been made.
  - ❍ Procedures for employees who remain to perform or shut down critical plant operations.
  - ❍ You may also want to consider designating a location for all employees to go to and procedures to account for all employees after an evacuation.
- **ERPs Should Be Accessible:**

○ Keep ERPs in a convenient location by all employees: exits, near time clocks and break rooms.
○ It is also a best practice to give each employee a copy during new hire training.

DESIGNATE A LEADER

When drafting your ERP, you may wish to select a responsible individual or individuals to lead and coordinate your emergency plan and evacuation. It is critical that employees know who the coordinator is and understand that person has the authority to make decisions during emergencies. An easy designation would be an office manager and/or plant manager.

The coordinator should be responsible for the following:

- Assessing the situation to determine whether an emergency exists that requires activation of your emergency procedures.
- Supervising all efforts in the area, including evacuating personnel.
- Coordinating outside emergency services, such as medical aid and local fire departments, and ensuring that they are available and notified when necessary.
- Directing the shutdown of plant operations when required.
- Notifying senior management of the emergency.

Employees designated to assist in emergency evacuation procedures as coordinators should be trained in the complete workplace layout and various alternative escape routes. All employees and those designated to assist in emergencies should be made aware of employees with special needs who may require extra assistance, how to use the buddy system, and hazardous areas to avoid during an emergency evacuation.

HOW DO YOU ALERT EMPLOYEES?

- Make sure alarms can be heard and recognized by all employees as a signal to evacuate the work area or perform actions identified in your plan.
- Make available an emergency communications system such as a public address system, portable radio unit, or other means to notify employees of the emergency and to contact local law enforcement, the fire department and others.
- Stipulate that alarms must be able to be heard, seen or otherwise perceived by everyone in the workplace.
- You may want to consider providing an auxiliary power supply in the event that electricity is shut off.

ALERT! YOU HAVE AN EMERGENCY

Now that you are prepared for the worst case scenario, it is critical that you can account for all employees after an evacuation, as well as any visitors—which include vendors, family members and plant tours. Use these tips as a guideline:

- Offer a sign-in sheet at the front entrance for any visitors.

- Keep names and contact information of key individuals both within and outside your company.
- Document procedures for employees who remain to perform or shut down critical plant operations.
- You will also want to consider designating an assembly location and procedures to account for all employees after an evacuation.

Additionally, you may find it helpful to include a secure on- or offsite location to store originals or duplicate copies of accounting records, legal documents, your employees' emergency contact lists and other essential records.

HOW WE CAN HELP

By fall 2003, WTCA is planning the release of its Operations Safety Certification Program. The goal of this project is to take the complex elements of implementing a comprehensive safety program, like ERPs, and create simple step-by-step tools to guide a safety manager through the process of evaluation, implementation and maintenance. At that point, the safety program will be passed on to your in-house safety committee, as well as employees. For more information on WTCA's Operations Safety Certification, contact WTCA safety@woodtruss.com.

EMERGENCY REPONSE PLAN: TEN COMMON ERRORS

1. No upper management support.
2. Lack of employee buy-in.
3. Poor or no planning.
4. Lack of training and practice.
5. No designated leader.
6. Failure to keep the plan up to date.
7. No method of communication to alert employees.
8. OSHA regulations are not part of the plan.
9. No procedures for shutting down critical equipment.
10. Employees are not told what actions to take in an emergency.

Sources: Occupational Safety and Health Administration Standard 1910.157 (www. osha.gov) and National Safety Council (www.nsc.org)

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