Why You Should Be Prepared

As the offshore hurricane approached land, we anticipated a significant impact from the 100-mph winds and a storm surge of 9 ft. Would power and other services be interrupted? How soon would we be able to resume operations? What if our supply chain network was disrupted? Will we be able to service our customers? What might this event cost the business?

With natural hazards like hurricanes barreling across the Atlantic and the uncertainty of manmade or technological hazards like the BP oil disaster, SH&E professionals need to be ready. When was the last time you reviewed your emergency management plan? Does your facility even have an emergency plan? Are you aware of the regulatory requirements for emergency action plans?

OSHA references emergency plans in many of its general industry standards. Many are focused on performance-based compliance, implying that an evaluation and assessment of the potential risks should be conducted resulting in a determination about what standards will apply. For example, if confined space entry and rescue are a possibility, then an appropriate plan should be established. Refer to 29 CFR 1910.146 Permit-Required Confined Spaces. Also, is your facility currently covered by 29 CFR 1910.119 Process Safety Management of Highly Hazardous Chemicals? Having an emergency plan relevant to the covered processes is also implied.

In Disaster Management and Preparedness, Thomas Schneid, Ph.D., explains, “Appropriate planning and preparedness before a disaster happens are essential to minimizing the risks and the resulting damages.” However, it is not enough to simply develop a plan. Do your employees know their responsibilities under the plan? Does your management team understand their roles as specified by the plan? Have you conducted a drill of the plan? If you rely on outside emergency responders, have you shared your plan with them? Training is part of preparedness.

Select any time during the year that is appropriate for your business to review your emergency plan and make necessary changes. An emergency plan should also be a living document. It is a best practice to have a written program that can be referenced by all parties that need access.

A comprehensive emergency management plan should address reaction and response by the facility in the event of a specific emergency. Be sure to evaluate what natural disasters may strike your place of business.

Emergencies and disasters can disrupt business continuity. They can inflict heavy losses to any enterprise, large or small. Planning and preparedness can reduce and help offset these losses.

On the U.S. east coast, hurricanes, nor’easters and flooding can be common occurrences, while earthquakes, volcanoes and landslides are unlikely. Manmade or technological disasters, such as chemical spills, gas releases, structural failures or fire, also need to be evaluated as part of your process.

What about evacuation? Are your employees trained to leave the premises and assemble at a safe location or do they shelter-in-place? This is important to capture in your plan. How do your employees know what response is required? If a fire has erupted inside the building, an external evacuation would be appropriate. However, an approaching tornado may require a shelter-in-place response so that your employees are not exposed to dangerous, hurling debris.

An emergency plan can also be used to address workplace violence, bomb threats and other security issues. We live in a post-9/11 society. The threat of terrorism in many forms should not be dismissed without much consideration. Three people were recently arrested outside a power plant late at night in rural Georgia. Authorities found wire cutters, shovels and ski masks in their car. They are suspected of potential terrorism.

Emergencies and disasters can disrupt business continuity. They can inflict heavy losses to any enterprise, large or small. Planning and preparedness can reduce and help offset these losses. This is fundamental to enterprise risk management. All stakeholders in your business will benefit from having a well-written, comprehensive emergency management plan that is reviewed with employees and drilled on an annual basis. When disaster strikes, will you be ready?

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