

Effective Preparedness Training: Improving Response to Major Incidents

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When a major safety incident occurs at your company's facility, what do you do? How do you manage immediate issues such as avoiding more danger, handling employee fear and managing circling media outlets? Site managers and their staffs may be hesitant to call in someone from corporate because they prefer to maintain control and would rather handle the situation privately without judgment or imposition.

The heat of the moment is not the best time to decide what needs to be done and who is going to fill each role. In some cases, organizations have created and documented protocols and procedures. But is that enough to enable people to be totally prepared? Many organizations do not know until a major incident happens. Without a thorough plan and adequate preparation, the situation can turn into total chaos.

How does one set up a system so that everyone understands what the response will look like and what their roles/responsibilities will be? Plant personnel respond with a goal to recover from the incident, so someone else needs to be prepared to respond with a goal to find the causes and solutions.

By designating, training and preparing employees ahead of time, and continuously practicing and refreshing training, organizations can be well-equipped to effectively prevent and respond to safety incidents. Following are recommended practices for setting up such a system.

Assembling a Team

It works well to assemble an investigation team and a root-cause analysis (RCA) team that will perform separate functions, but collaborate and integrate. The investigation team should include people who have specific training and experience in conducting investigations. Depending on the size of the organization and the geography of its sites, investigators may reside on site or travel from a corporate site to the scene (provided they can arrive in a few hours).

It is also important to consider how many people should be on the investigation team. Because it is essential to preserve and capture evidence while it is fresh, it is important to make sure that enough

people are assigned to the team for an immediate, effective response. Responsibilities should be divided based on skill sets, as well as investigation training and experience. This can make the difference between success and failure.

The investigation team focuses on collecting evidence, then turns the findings over to an RCA team to review and analyze. The RCA team would ideally include people with subject-matter expertise that relates to the incident so they are able to analyze the evidence effectively. After the initial analysis, the RCA team may have questions or requests for additional information, which can be funneled back to the investigation team. The investigation team's size can change throughout the process—larger in the immediate aftermath, then smaller as time passes, but still on-the-ready to handle follow-up needs.

When an incident involves contractor personnel or equipment, special considerations must be taken into account and prepared for. This is a precaution that many companies do not take, and it can cause problems. The contractor should be aware of the process and be aware of how its personnel will integrate into the process in the event of a major incident.

Preparation & Training

Once the roles and responsibilities are established, a specific training and skill-building plan should be outlined for each team member. This plan should be revisited regularly to ensure that it does not fall to the bottom of the priority list compared to more pressing daily responsibilities.

The team leaders also should work with the plants/sites to prepare them on what to expect in the event of a major incident and what roles plant-/site-level personnel will play.

Confidentiality

As a point of order, it is wise to ask everyone designated to serve on the investigation and RCA teams to sign a confidentiality agreement in advance. This should outline expectations related to what they can and cannot do with the information they will learn through their regular work and through the course of the investigation.

Launching the Investigation Protocol

When an incident first occurs, the protocol should outline who will initiate the investigation process. Usually, the only people authorized to do so are a vice president, a plant/site manager or someone who is designated to act on their behalf.

Responding to a Major Incident

When an incident occurs and the investigation team is called, the team leader must talk the plant/site leader through the immediate steps that should be taken while the investigation team is en route. This obviously includes ensuring the safety of on-site personnel and securing the scene to preserve evidence. The less-obvious steps include taking photos immediately if any evidence will be lost, keeping workers on site who may be going off shift or at least capturing in written form their knowledge of what occurred.

Communications

Beyond securing the scene and minimizing any lingering safety threats, one of the first challenges to contend with is communication. This includes proactively pushing out information to appropriate stakeholders, such as internal legal and corporate communication departments. It also requires responding to urgent requests from the families of involved employees, contractors, the surrounding community and the media.

A communications protocol should outline which audiences need to be informed, the order of priority/urgency, who should do the communicating, and, in concept, what information is appropriate for each audience. The team should understand the difference between hearsay/speculation and facts, then communicate only the facts. Conversely, someone should be designated to field the incoming inquiries and needs from each audience, gather information needed for response, delegate response as appropriate and ensure follow-up.

Legal

Another early consideration is communicating with the legal department. Ahead of time, the investigation team should establish who is responsible for making the first call, serving as a continuing liaison with the legal department and executing whatever that department directs. With the legal department, the team must consider the obvious liabilities and agree on steps to identify the less obvious ones. In some cases, the legal department may suggest an internal investigation, but in others—especially when litigation is anticipated—the department might decide to call external, third-party investigators as they may have more credibility in the eyes of law enforcement, opposing counsel, regulators and court.

Gathering Evidence because plant personnel will likely be affected by the incident in various ways, including carrying extra responsibilities and working extra hours, investigation team members must tailor their information-gathering needs to the needs of their sources.

For instance, while it is important to ask for witness accounts while memories are fresh, it may only be realistic to ask for a few minutes of their time on the first pass, knowing that you can return for more details or perspective later.

People who conduct interviews in an investigation should have opportunities to build their knowledge and skills in non-crisis mode since some of these skills are intangible and require judgment that can only be acquired through experience.

It also takes specialized knowledge and experience to make decisions about the balance between securing the scene to preserve evidence, and the need to get the processes back online to minimize the cost of an event. This often requires careful prioritization, communication and coordination.

Practice

As noted, protocols alone will not effectively prepare an organization for a crisis situation. It is easy for organizations to decide that the risk of an incident is so low that it would be a waste of time to go beyond plan-making. But organizations that have taken such an approach, then experienced a crisis, will admit that they wish they had been more prepared and that their preparation would have enabled them to minimize the consequences more effectively. Leaders should consider staging a mock event at least annually. Organizations that have done so report that although they encountered initial resistance, when an actual incident occurred people admitted that the drill was valuable. The mock event should be prearranged with a particular site, but should be unexpected by the people on the investigation and RCA teams.

Debrief

After a real incident, it is tempting to get wrapped up in the fallout and be eager to get back to normal work. But, whether it was a real or mock event, it is essential to debrief. Focus on what went well and what did not go well, then dig deeper to understand the cause. Be realistic about team members' preparation and comfort level, then identify knowledge- and skill-building that can improve the response. A specific action item list should be the outcome, including expectations and timelines for individual and collective improvement. Consider who should be involved in the debrief. In sensitive cases, it may be most appropriate to debrief with only the team so it is a safe environment. At some point, it can be valuable to invite representatives from the plant/site who interfaced closely with the team. In other cases, especially when the team is experienced and confident, it can be valuable to include plant managers and other

leaders. This helps boost their confidence in the capabilities of the investigation/RCA teams, and increases their comfort level with calling for help in the future. When other key audiences in the corporation, including upper management and plant/site personnel, see the investigation/RCA teams in action and have accurate expectations that are met, they are much more likely to support the function culturally, practically and financially.

Keep Skills Fresh

Even when an incident response goes well and the debrief is positive, it is important to practice regularly. No matter how well-trained and knowledgeable personnel may be, skills can become rusty if not practiced.

Conclusion

Effective response to major incidents and the ability to prevent their recurrence will be significantly improved by creating detailed crisis response protocols, preassigning all responsibilities to the qualified people, and providing training, practice and refreshers that prepare team members for those roles. Even though day-to-day demands may seem too pressing, continuous education and improvement in crisis preparation will pay off many times over when an actual major incident occurs.

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