PREPARE, RESPOND & RECOVER

Incident Response as a Safety & Risk Manager

By Joseph A. Knickerbocker

The Boy Scouts motto "be prepared" is one that the author, as an Eagle Scout, has endeavored to apply to every aspect of life and career. As a safety professional, it is important to help your teams prepare for, respond to and recover from incidents in the workplace.

Working in the safety profession proves just how complicated being prepared can be. This article presents the framework of "prepare, respond and recover" as a useful method to tackle the task.

Prepare: Be Proactive in Avoiding Incidents

As a safety and risk manager, there are many ways you can prepare to respond to incidents on the sites for which you provide support. This section breaks down some of the most crucial.

Build Trust

Build a relationship of trust with your team. This applies not only to your company's direct employees, but to trade partners that may frequently work in your area as well. When they need you, it is best to be in a position where they will call you instead of trying to handle a problem alone or, worse, hide incidents from you. Do all you can to build a relationship of confidence and trust. Your site management teams depend on you to know what to do when an incident occurs on their project. Help to develop and familiarize workers with:

- site-specific crisis management plans and emergency action plans,
- unique restrictions and rules governing your sites,
- internal safety resources your employer provides, and
- all related jurisdictional requirements (e.g., applicable OSHA or other federal regulations)

In short, never stop becoming the most knowledgeable risk manager that you can be.

Stay Ready

Help your team stay response ready by running drills and tabletop simulations. These activities maximize the application of the team's experience. Your team can continuously spot and address holes in your emergency plans by periodically asking "What if . . . ?"

Develop an OSH Network

Build a network of safety professionals who are willing to guide you. Remember that you are never alone. There are many safety and risk management professionals willing to help you succeed. Find them by looking in your company, local ASSP chapter, or industry-specific posts and profiles on social media. You will find people ready to connect with and support you. Keep in mind it is easier to reach out when in need if your relationship already exists; proactively build relationships with peer safety professionals that you trust.

Correct Exposures

Train your teams to recognize and correct the exposures they identify. This can start with tried and true methods shared during regularly scheduled safety trainings. As new technologies and processes are implemented, you will need to help find and share increasingly proactive ways to protect employees from new hazards that these changes may introduce. Scheduled site safety inspections are great opportunities for informal training, but never waste an opportunity to be a friendly resource whenever you walk around the project.

Maintain Certifications

Help team members maintain needed certifications and training. These might include first aid, CPR and AED certification.

Follow Up on Observations

Document and follow up on observed behaviors and conditions, both good and bad. Earn trust by communicating these findings with affected individuals and site management in real time. Face-to-face conversation is usually the best way to communicate care and redirection, but call or send a text when that is not possible. This helps establish perception of your logged safety observations as the valuable management resources they are rather than as unwelcome to-do items.

Share Information

Share current and relevant safety alerts, bulletins and other lessons learned. We all grow together. Make sure to share important information with your on-site teams and with the rest of your safety network.

Respond: What to Do When an Incident Occurs

As a safety manager, you may be covering one site full-time or supporting many sites. In either case, you may not be the first to be notified of an incident. As soon as you are notified, support your team—remotely at minimum, but ideally and whenever possible with your boots on the ground to assist with the following important tasks immediately:

- Ensure that involved personnel receive needed care. During events that require emergency medical services, ensure that they are given prompt access to the area. When an incident requires an evacuation, ensure that all individuals are accounted for.
- Make sure the scene is safe and secured.
- Either begin capturing facts or guide the on-site supervisor or superintendent in doing so. If your company has standard forms, help your team locate the appropriate forms.
- Ensure that all notifications are made. Escalate the incident within your company hierarchy. When OSHA-reportable incidents involve company employees, work with the company's regional safety director to contact OSHA in accordance with applicable state or federal requirements. In cases where employees of trade partners or vendors sustain injuries, you may need to guide trade partners in fulfilling their OSHA reporting requirements.
- Whenever possible, attend OSHA site walks related to the incident.

Responding to an incident requires a considerable amount of accurate information. Communication during and immediately following an incident is crucial for determining a course of action. The intensity of your response should mirror the level of the incident. Have a plan and execute it when incidents occur on your site. When the dust is settling and the

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initial response is complete, it is time to start the recovery process.

Recover: Use the People, Places & Things Approach

When it comes to recovery, remember the phrase, "people, places and things."

People

Be an advocate for the people with whose safety you are charged, and ensure that they get the care they need. Accompany the individual for the initial clinic visit and, when possible, for follow-up visits. The purpose of attending the clinic visits is to ensure that needed care and restrictions communicated by medical service providers are also communicated on site and that the level of care is accurately documented before you leave the clinic. This is how to ensure that first-aid treatment is not documented as OSHA recordable or reportable.

Depending on the company, you may be required to attend clinic visits. Before leaving the clinic, always make sure you understand enough about each case to be an advocate for the employee both at the doctor's office and in the workplace.

In cases where individuals receive care from professionals who are not familiar with OSHA injury classifications, you may need to advocate for the company as well. Work closely with the claims administrator and safety director any time employees require care outside of your company's approved occupational clinics.

Places

Whenever an incident such as a natural disaster, contamination or explosion affects any work area, ensure that the recovery process is performed in a safe manner. This may require bringing in qualified experts, such as for hazardous material cleanup or inspecting a building's structural integrity and safety.

The rush to get back to business can tempt owners, operations management and employees to compromise their safety values, which can lead to further damage and injury. Get the right experts to weigh in, make a recovery plan and stick to it.

Things

Learn from the things that you cannot change such as past events, and influence the things that you can. In other words, do not let lessons from any incident or injury go to waste. To optimally recover from an incident, we must become stronger and more immune to similar incidents in the future. These lessons can be found in all the things that led up to the incident. They can be analyzed in many ways, and your employer may already have a required process in place.

One option is to use a system of root-cause analysis that seeks to find all the relevant causal factors and identify their relationships to each other and to the incident. No matter what system you use, help facilitate a cause analysis and support corrective and preventive measures. In minor cases, this can often be done informally as a conversation with the individuals involved. However, when an official cause analysis and the corresponding documentation and meeting are required, you will need to facilitate or assist the facilitator in collecting required facts and analyzing the causal relationships.

Support your teams with proven industry solutions and applicable regulatory standards so the implemented corrective and preventive measures are both effective and sustainable. Once you have analyzed and learned from the facts, help others in the organization and industry learn from the incident and protect against similar risks. Consider creating and sharing a safety alert or bulletin that shares lessons learned while maintaining the anonymity of those involved.

Conclusion

In short, remember these key points:

- Be prepared by building strong relationships of trust with your teams.
- When incidents occur, your teams will look to you for guidance. They depend on you to have a plan, so maintain familiarity with your emergency action and crisis management plans and keep your teams informed.
- When an incident occurs, show up in the best way you can.
- Ask, "What do I know and who else needs to know it?" Do not wait, communicate. During the roughest times, communication is crucial.
- Actively manage employees' injury cases to ensure the best care for the individuals and the least impact to your company.
- Document and share lessons learned.

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Joseph A. Knickerbocker, CSP, CHST, CRIS, is a senior safety manager at Okland Construction. He holds a B.S. in Building Construction, Construction Management from Weber State University. He has been a Red Cross and OSHA 500 instructor for more than 10 years and produces safety policies and training videos. Knickerbocker is a professional member of ASSP's Utah Chapter.