

FROM RESPONSE TO READINESS A Practical Model for Emergency Team Transition

By Jacquelyn Seth

Most organizations have emergency response teams (ERTs) in place, supported by training, drills and designated responsibilities. Yet many workplace emergencies still feel disorganized. Evacuations take longer than expected. Employees wait for direction instead of acting. Alerts are missed. Accountability is delayed.

These outcomes are rarely caused by a lack of response capability. More often, they reflect gaps in readiness.

An exit that stayed blocked for weeks, a team that is unfamiliar with shelter locations, a severe weather message that no one reinforced, and employees who are unsure what constitutes a reportable concern are not response failures. These are readiness breakdowns, and they shape what happens before an emergency unfolds.

This article presents a practical model for evolving traditional emergency response teams into emergency readiness teams. The shift is not about adding new duties or expanding workload; it is about strengthening the everyday behaviors that make emergency performance more reliable, more predictable and less chaotic.

The Changing Nature of Workplace Emergencies

Workplace emergencies today are different from those of a decade ago. Severe weather events are more frequent and disruptive. Many workforces are hybrid, with employees who may be less familiar with their physical work environment. Information travels quickly during incidents, but communication may not be clear. Stress levels can rise quickly.

When stress increases, people revert to habit and familiarity. If employees only engage with emergency procedures during annual drills, they are more likely to hesitate or wait for direction during a real event. National preparedness principles emphasize that mitigation and preparedness are essential phases of emergency management, not secondary steps after response (FEMA, 2025).

Why "Emergency Response" Is Too Narrow

Traditional ERT programs focus on evacuation support, first aid, fire extinguisher use and scene assistance. These are essential functions, but they are episodic. Team members may train periodically and remain largely invisible between events.

Yet most emergency outcomes are shaped before an event occurs. Employees who already know where to go, who recognize life safety hazards and who are comfortable speaking up reduce confusion before an incident escalates. These are readiness behaviors. They occur daily and quietly influence emergency performance.

Human Behavior Under Stress

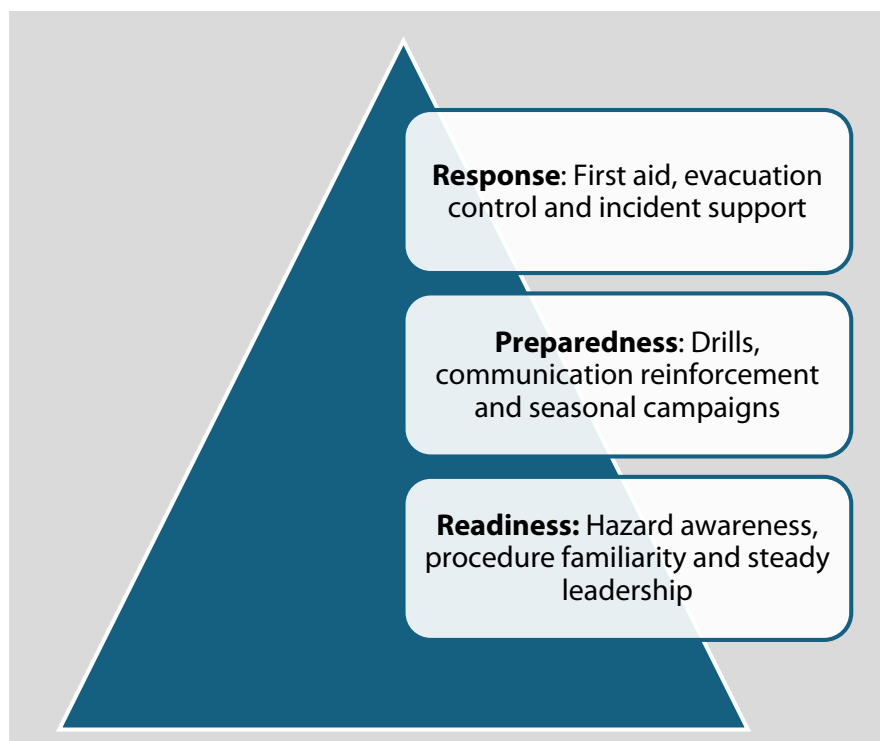
Human performance principles explain why readiness matters. Under stress, attention narrows. Decision-making slows. People look for familiar cues and steady peers rather than detailed instructions. In those moments, the presence of a calm, recognizable employee who reinforces emergency procedures can make a meaningful difference.

Employees who see readiness team members actively modeling preparedness during normal operations are more likely to follow them during disruptions. Readiness, therefore, is not only procedural; it is psychological.

Common Gaps in Traditional ERT Models

In many corporate settings, ERT members are identified only during drills. Preparedness communication peaks around training cycles, then fades. Employees may not know who ERT members are or what role they play outside emergencies. Organizations often rely heavily on mass notification systems, assuming technology alone ensures preparedness. This creates a disconnect. Emergency management feels separate from daily work rather than integrated into it.

FIGURE 1
EMERGENCY PERFORMANCE PYRAMID



From Response to Readiness: What Changes

The shift from an emergency response team to an emergency readiness team reframes the role from reactive support to proactive influence. Members become visible advocates for preparedness rather than just responders during events. They become force multipliers.

This does not require major time commitments. Instead, it involves small but consistent actions: reinforcing evacuation routes during team meetings and safety discussions, sharing seasonal preparedness reminders, reporting blocked egress routes and serving as a calm point of contact during disruptions.

Emergency performance can be visualized as a pyramid (Figure 1). The top layer is response—first aid, evacuation control and incident support. The middle layer is preparedness—drills, communication reinforcement and seasonal risk campaigns. The base layer is everyday readiness—hazard awareness, procedure familiarity and steady leadership presence. The strength of the base determines how well the upper layers function.

During a severe weather alert, employees who have previously reviewed shelter procedures move more quickly and with less confusion. During an evacuation, familiarity with rally points shortens accountability time. When suspicious activity occurs, employees who have been encouraged to speak up escalate concerns earlier. During a power outage, employees familiar with disruption protocols respond calmly rather than waiting for instructions.

Phased Transition Model

Organizations can transition from response to readiness in phases:

- 1) Adjust language and identity by renaming the team and clarifying expectations.
- 2) Increase visibility by introducing members at meetings and including them in regular safety discussions.
- 3) Integrate readiness prompts into existing systems such as safety meetings and seasonal campaigns.
- 4) Reinforce the culture by recognizing preparedness behaviors, not just incident response.

Leadership's Role

Leadership reinforces what matters. When leaders model emergency



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preparedness behaviors and recognize early reporting or communication reinforcement, employees understand that readiness is part of everyday safety, not an extra task.

Measuring Readiness

Organizations can track indicators that reflect readiness, including life safety deficiency reports, participation in preparedness communications, evacuation accountability times and communication reach during disruptions.

Cultural Impact

When preparedness is visible, safety becomes routine rather than episodic. Employees begin to see emergency management as part of normal operations. The term “emergency readiness team” communicates proactivity, shared responsibility and everyday awareness.

Emergencies will always require response. Resilience, however, depends on readiness. The most prepared workplaces are those where employees are ready before something goes wrong. Making the shift from emergency response teams to emergency readiness teams helps organizations build that foundation. **PSJ**

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References

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