

Evacuation Planning Best Practices

By Joseph J. DesPlaines

Evacuation preparedness involves more than an annual fire drill to ensure the health and safety of employees and guests.

Crisis management, which is sometimes termed disaster or emergency management, or disaster response, has received a great deal of attention this past decade. Many recognized experts have proposed “best practices” in this regard, one of which is to develop an effective facility evacuation plan that incorporates evacuation drills on a regular basis.

This essay will highlight best practices for implementing an effective evacuation plan. The approaches being proposed here are based on the author’s considerable experience managing large-scale, mass-casualty events.

The nine best practices for evacuation planning are:

1. **Secure management support for evacuation planning and communicate this support to employees.** Developing an effective plan should not be viewed as a project. Rather, employees need to perceive evacuation preparedness as part of an organization’s *culture of safety*.

The best way to achieve that broad acceptance is to have the unconditional and explicit backing of senior management. The CEO’s support, communicated through an e-mail to every employee, as well as direct and visible participation in training and drills, helps set the right example. Simply said, if the CEO and the senior management team are engaged in evacuation preparedness, the employees will be engaged, as well.

2. **Review current plans.** There is no need to “reinvent the wheel,” but there may be a need to update evacuation plans by answering the following questions:
 - Has your facility expanded?
 - Has the space been reconfigured?
 - Do you have more employees occupying the same space?
 - Are floor plans with clearly marked evacuation routes posted?

Answers to these questions will determine the need for further plan modifications.

3. **Walk the evacuation routes.** Most people will try to exit a facility the same way they entered. That is basic human nature. If on an upper floor, most folks understand the need to avoid elevators, but will use the stairway closest to the elevator. However, is this the closest exit to their workspace?

To ensure the most expedient and safest evacuation, employees and their guests need to be assigned the exit closest to their work area, and the exit route must be walked to ensure there are no hazards.

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I recall walking 35 floors down a stairway in a Manhattan office building and finding that tenants on lower floors were using the landings for storage and trash! This could have caused a life-threatening situation.

Walking the evacuation routes has two valuable benefits:

- Familiarity with all alternative escape routes
- Ensuring that no hazards are present

4. **Divide the space into zones, assign zone leaders and zone searchers, and account for employees.** Following evacuation, a common practice is to account for employees by their department. However, this approach typically creates challenges, as department employees are frequently dispersed throughout a facility.

A more workable solution is to divide the facility into zones, with a leader and searcher for each. The zone searchers are the last to evacuate and are responsible for walking the zone to ensure everyone is out (mixed gender search teams are recommended so that restrooms can be searched).

The zone leader is responsible for carrying a list of employees in his/her zone so that a post-evacuation head count can be performed and any missing employees identified. The organization's ability to provide information about missing employees to first responders (police, fire, emergency medical) helps direct the focus of search and rescue efforts.

5. **Ensure that plans for disabled employees are in place.** Regardless of regulatory requirements, many organizations have neglected to develop and test an evacuation plan for employees with special needs. This would include co-workers in wheelchairs as well as those who are visually or hearing impaired.

But what about employees who have less obvious physical impairments? For example, I suffer from osteoarthritis and my mobility has been severely compromised (until I get my new knee next month). In an evacuation, I would have considerable difficulty negotiating stairways, a thought that is disturbing with an office on the third floor.

At the very least, keep a list of all employees who have special challenges, develop a "buddy system" to provide them with assistance, and practice evacuating these colleagues.

6. **Pre-identify and assign assembly points for each zone.** Once folks have evacuated the building, they need to gather at an assembly point to meet their zone leader.

Assembly points should be located at least 100 yards from the building to allow adequate space for first responders and to be protected from any explosions, falling debris or other hazards.

7. **Have accurate floor plans available for first responders.** I recently asked a fire chief what he thought was the most important information he needed when responding to an office building or factory fire. Without hesitation he responded "up-to-date floor plans."

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We must remember that first responders are entering an unfamiliar building, one that may be filled with smoke or debris. We may also be asking them to retrieve colleagues we believe to be in certain specific locations.

Providing an accurate facility map is a valuable tool in assisting these public safety professionals in saving lives and effectively managing the crisis.

8. **Conduct training and testing.** If you follow all the preceding best practices, you probably have a pretty good plan. However, it is worthless if the employees don't know how it works.

Evacuation plan training usually takes no more than an hour and is designed to give employees an understanding of why the plan was developed and how it works. Testing, the act of rehearsing the evacuation path and completing the accounting for employees process, will prove invaluable in the event of a crisis.

Training and testing should be conducted at least twice per year.

9. **Create ownership and a maintenance plan.** Finally, someone needs to be the owner of evacuation planning and maintenance, and evacuation management should be a part of this employee's job responsibilities and annual performance goals. Without clear ownership, the plan will wither and employee engagement will diminish. Part of the owner's responsibility will be to create an annual evacuation preparedness process that includes:

- Annual evacuation plan review and updates
- Scheduling training and testing
- Annual plan review with first responders

Just as fire drills serve to teach elementary school aged children, workplace drills provide the rehearsal necessary for employees to efficiently evacuate a facility and account for employees. Hopefully, these best practices will enable any organization to develop effective evacuation preparedness, reducing the vulnerability of employees and guests to the risks of a workplace disaster.

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