



CHANGING THE CULTURE: Best Practices for Employee Evacuation Planning

By Joseph J. DesPlaines

Crisis management, also known as disaster management, disaster response or emergency management, has received a great deal of attention this past decade. Terrorist attacks, fires, natural disasters, workplace violence, and other incidents routinely make headlines, culminating with the devastating March 11 9.0 magnitude earthquake and tsunami in Japan.

These events present a serious concern for organizations that need to protect one of their most valuable assets: their workforce. Employers need to be prepared to quickly evacuate their workplace when an incident occurs. It's also important to realize that evacuation preparedness involves more than an annual fire drill to ensure the health and safety of employees and guests.

Many recognized experts have proposed "best practices" in this regard, one of which is to develop a facility evacuation plan that incorporates evacuation drills on a regular basis. This article will highlight the best practices for implementing an evacuation plan. The steps proposed below are based on Empathia's considerable experience managing large scale, mass casualty events.

PLANNING AND COMMUNICATION

For any plan to be truly effective, commitment must start at the top. Company executives should give their full support for planning and communicate it to employees. Of equal importance, developing an evacuation plan should not be viewed as a one-time project; rather, employees need to perceive evacuation preparedness as part of an ongoing culture of safety.

The best way to achieve that broad acceptance is to have the unconditional and explicit backing of senior management. A CEO's support—communicated through emails to every employee as well as visible participation in training and drills—helps set the right example. Simply put, if the CEO and senior management team are engaged in evacuation preparedness, employees will be engaged too.

First, review your current plans. Don't reinvent the wheel, but determine whether there's a need to update an existing evacuation plan by answering some basic questions:

- Has your facility expanded?
- Has the space been reconfigured?
- Are more employees occupying the same space?
- Are floor plans posted with clearly marked evacuation routes?

The answers to these questions will determine the need for making further changes.

RETHINKING YOUR FACILITY

Walk the evacuation routes for your building and inspect them firsthand. Most people will try to exit a facility the same way they entered; it's basic human nature. When on an upper floor, most individuals understand the need to avoid elevators but they will use the stairway closest to an elevator. However, is this truly the closest exit to their workspace?

To ensure the safest and most expedient 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. 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: it creates familiarity with all alternative escape routes, and it ensures that no hazards are present.

employees need to perceive evacuation preparedness as part of an ongoing culture of safety

Following evacuation, it's a common practice to account for employees via their department. Yet this approach can be challenging, 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 rest rooms 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) is crucial because it helps direct the focus of search and rescue efforts.

With today's diverse workplace, plans must account for disabled employees in case of an evacuation. We actually are required by federal law to have a handicapped evacuation plan in place. Yet, we find that 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, let's say an employee suffers from osteoarthritis and their mobility has been severely compromised. In an evacuation, they would have considerable difficulty negotiating stairways—a disturbing thought to those who work on upper floors.

Keep a list of all employees who have special challenges, develop a "buddy system" to provide them with assistance, and regularly practice evacuating these colleagues.

ONCE THEY'RE OUT, IT'S NOT OVER

Getting employees out of the facility is only the first step to ensuring their safety. As part of your evacuation plan, pre-identify and assign assembly points for each zone. Once employees 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 give protection from explosions, falling debris, or other hazards.

It's also important that accurate floor plans are 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." Remember, first responders are entering an unfamiliar building, one that may be filled with smoke or debris. We may be asking them to retrieve colleagues in specific locations. Providing a facility map is a valuable tool in assisting these public safety professionals in saving lives and effectively managing the crisis.

The organization's ability to provide information about missing employees to first responders is crucial

MAINTAINING A CULTURE OF SAFETY

workplace drills provide the rehearsal necessary for employees to efficiently evacuate a facility

If you followed all the preceding best practices, you probably have a pretty good plan. However, it's worthless if the employees don't know how it works. Testing and training is an essential part of an effective evacuation plan. Just as fire drills serve to teach elementary school children, workplace drills provide the rehearsal necessary for employees to efficiently evacuate a facility and account for employees.

This kind of 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. A rehearsal that traces the evacuation path and completes the process of accounting for employees will prove invaluable when a crisis strikes. Training and testing should be conducted at least twice per year.

Lastly, someone needs to be the owner of evacuation planning and maintenance; without clear ownership, the plan will wither and employee engagement will diminish. Evacuation management should be a part of this employee's job responsibilities and annual performance goals. The position should be responsible for creating an annual evacuation preparedness process that includes:

- annual evacuation plan review and updates
- scheduling of training and testing
- a yearly plan review with first responders

Hopefully, these best practices will enable any organization to develop an effective evacuation plan that reduces the vulnerability of employees and guests in the event of a workplace disaster.

Joseph J. DesPlaines is Vice President, Risk Services at Black Swan Solutions®, a strategic business unit of **Empathia, Inc.** Empathia provides behavioral health solutions that improve the health, safety and productivity of organizations and individuals. The company collaborates with private and public sector entities from expansive Fortune 500 corporations to small businesses to address a diverse range of needs: employee assistance, disaster response and planning, work-life balance, employee relations, leadership development, training and benefits support. Founded in 1982 under the name NEAS, Empathia has distinguished itself as a quality leader dedicated to creating a superior customer experience for both client organizations and employees. For more information, visit www.empathia.com.