



Don't tell them anything because you might scare them: What tenants need to know

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Urban Myth #1: "Tenants in high-rise office buildings are like mushrooms; during an incident, keep them in the dark and feed them as little information as possible so they will not panic."

Urban Myth #2: "During an incident, the building staff and first responders have a "lock" on situational awareness."

Unfortunately, these myths endure. Too many building staffs and first responders seem to believe that tenants do not have the wherewithal to think for themselves during an incident and therefore provide tenants insufficient information. One trend found during post-incident reviews is that, either by commission or omission, tenants are not provided adequate information in a timely fashion. Often these are unintended errors of omission as the building staff is scrambling to decipher incident details and to provide information to tenants via all-building announcements, notification systems or mass emails. Incredibly, there have been recent "errors of commission" where first responders have prohibited the building staff from making announcements to the tenants, even though the tenants could see police, fire and EMS activity outside their windows. Why can't we get the audio to match the video?

Since we live in a world of metrics, let's do some comparisons. Let's poll the available "information conduits" between tenants and building staff and see which group has the largest number of information sources. Ready? Here we go . . . televisions: tenants; computer interfaces: tenants; ability to tweet, IM and text: tenants; windows: tenants. And probably the most convincing statistic of all: the tenant to building staff eyes and ears ratio. In most commercial high-rise buildings there are at least tenfold (and often a hundredfold) more tenants than there are building staff. Why, then, are building staffs and first responders either unwilling or unable to provide tenants timely and accurate information? Why are tenants told to "stand by for instructions" when, in fact, they may have a better understanding of what is occurring?

Obviously, we do not want to have building occupants put themselves in harm's way; but most tenants, given their options (evacuate, relocate or shelter-in-place); the types of incidents which coincide with each of these protocols; and integrated, thoughtful training, will usually make the right decision in the absence of other guidance.

So let's ask ourselves the next obvious question: are we training our tenants, in the absence of information, to think on their feet? Are we acknowledging the current reality that tenants may have more accurate information than the building staff or first responders? Or are we telling them to disregard their information conduits and to "standby" for instructions, even if that information is delayed or, in the worst case, never comes. Are we conducting drills and training to meet compliance or to truly enhance preparedness? Are we training our tenants to understand the nuances of incident decision making? Are we encouraging and allowing them to get involved and

"role play" during drills and training? And, in the absence of information, are we teaching them not to panic but to consider their options and make their best choice? If not, it is certainly high time we begin to do so.

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