



Emergency preparedness: Reflecting on "9/11," ten years later

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As we reflect back on the tragedy of "9/11," we remember the horrendous details of the unanticipated. The devastation, the loss of life and the resulting revulsion of the unexpected, shook us to our roots. After the reality sunk in and we embarked on the long recovery process that followed, we quickly learned that we had to do something to protect people, property and assets in the event of an unexpected disaster. Our Federal government responded and instituted protective measures to preclude another such tragedy.

A crisis can occur any place, anytime and come in a variety of forms. We still remember Hurricane Katrina of 2005 and its monumental devastation. More recently we've seen the floods in Australia, the earthquake in Christchurch and the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear power plant disaster, all at once, in Japan. I repeat, "A crisis can occur any place, any time and come in a variety of forms." Serious natural phenomena are life threatening and can wipe out an entire economic infrastructure. But we do not have to experience natural disasters of major proportions to affect our day-to-day business operations. Lesser natural or manmade disasters, on a local level, can cause downed power and communications lines, blackouts, floods, fires and explosions and the ability to get to work, which can severely affect our ability to operate our businesses.

As a property owner or manager, you are undoubtedly aware of the long-term serious impact of a business interruption, the related high costs associated with "down-times" and worse, the loss of life or the total loss of a facility.

Regrettably, recent surveys show that concerns about emergencies have been relegated to a lesser importance for any number of reasons. One might be the lagging economy; another might be denial. All building owners must anticipate a crisis or emergency of any proportions, for it is no longer a question of if you can expect a crisis, it's a matter of when one might occur.

In addition to dealing with the planning for the continuity of business operations, your emergency plan must include procedures to deal with safety of personnel: the evacuation of a facility, which is of prime importance, assigned responsibility and actions to be taken by personnel in the event of fire, explosion, flood, power outage or even civil unrest.

Coincidentally, the 100th anniversary of the Triangle Shirt Waist Company fire that killed 146 employees was on March 25. Needless to say, in those days, there were no emergency plans and certainly no drills were ever conducted. The recent public broadcast film of this tragic event clearly stated that when the fire broke out, "Nobody knew what to do!"

When a crisis occurs it is imperative that you have a written, tested emergency preparedness plan; a business response and recovery plan that has been reviewed, if not prepared, by emergency planning specialists who know your business.

Viable emergency preparedness and business continuity plans have several essential ingredients.

The plan should start with the establishment of a crisis management team who activates the approved and tested emergency plan in the event of a disaster.

Another most critical issue with regard to the emergency plan is the need to train building staff on its contents and on the implementation of the procedures. It is strongly recommended that periodic, random drills be performed on all procedures in the plan throughout the year. Safeguards International is presently conducting life safety training for building operating personnel in New York. Each of these procedures deal with the safety of people through facility emergency planning including evacuation, the safe storage of vital information, valuable items and equipment, back-up emergency measures, special needs and, finally, damage assessment, scheduled facility repairs and safe and secure re-occupation of a building.

As a property owner or facility manager, you are undoubtedly aware of the long-term serious impact of a business interruption, and the related high costs associated with "down-times." In most cases down-time is not an option. A business interruption of any kind can have devastating effects in operations, finance and administration.

The plan should establish an emergency command center. The plan must have the provisions for worst-case scenarios such as when buildings are rendered inoperable.

Are you prepared for cyber attacks? Cyber threats know no boundaries. Is your sensitive digital information encrypted? Are your work stations restricted to only authorized users? Do you have back-up sites ready to go? Are there redundant sites where back-up equipment, servers or mainframes, reside? Are nearby sites prepared to act as recovery sites where staff can operate out of with replacement workstations?

Do employees have the accessibility to laptop computers and FAX machines for use at their residences and the ability to access company back-up data networks to maintain company operations and to stay in touch with management?

Did the company make provisions for off-site storage of critical records and data? Specifically, human resources records which will enable efficient contact with employees and their families.

I cannot stress enough, the absolute requirement for an emergency preparedness plan that deals with emergencies of any proportions, large or small, as well as an ongoing program of testing the plan with emergency simulations and drills on a periodic basis.

Safeguards International emergency planning and business continuity specialists are ready to work with building owners and property managers to assure that in the event of an unexpected emergency, you will be prepared to save lives and minimize the risks to your operations and businesses.

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