



## Now what?

**O**ur role as Health and Safety Professionals is to prepare for the unexpected. We consider the “what ifs”. We plan. We drill. We evaluate. And then, we do it all again. The purpose of all of this planning and all the drills is that if the worst happens individuals know what to do and how to handle the situation. But, do we think about the aftermath? Have we got a plan for how to deal with the situation after the fact? Are we prepared for physical and psychological complications that come with an event?

In some cases or for some aspects, we may be prepared. But, depending upon the severity and outside influences, we may not be as prepared as we thought. Let's look at the mechanics of an event. Something bad happens, the emergency plans are implemented and then the emergency is resolved. What happens next? Most of us think about the reports that must be generated, the accident investigation, and general mechanics of the clean-up. The goal is to return to normal as quickly as possible and with as little disruption as possible. If there are injuries, then the situation takes on additional gravity, is the person being cared for properly, are the follow-up visits occurring, etc.? Each incident has its own personality and tends to take on a life of its own. Depending upon the location and severity of the event, it also impacts the organization and the institutional memory.

But, what about those not directly involved? What about interactions over the next few days and weeks? How does it impact the culture? Are you more likely to have another incident or series of near misses? Of course the answer depends on the severity of the first incident as well as your post-incident management.

Recently there have been a number of high profile incidents: laboratory fires, poisonings and explosions. These events have brought to the forefront a focus on what happens next. There is the management of the media and getting the information out to the community. Then dealing with those directly affected:

- Do I come into work tomorrow?
- Are we having class?
- How do I replace my possessions?

- Where is the money coming from?
- Who is going to pay the doctor bill?

The list of question goes on. Additionally, the normal work plans have to be adjusted:

- Is that meeting going to go on as planned?
- Is that stack test going to happen?
- Can we meet the production schedule?

And finally, you now may be faced with a host of inspectors from different agencies and will probably get help from “management”. How are you going to deal with all of that plus arrange for clean-up, repairs, and getting things back to normal? The question is do you have a plan for that? Most of us don't. But here are some things that you can do immediately to help manage the situation:

- (1) Immediately after an event – provide people with information. Answer the immediate questions – what should they do now? Where can they get up-to-date information?
- (2) Remind everyone that they need to be focused. After an event people get very distracted and fail to take appropriate precautions or fail to recognize hazards. Keep everyone focused and remind them that conditions in their area may have changed due to the incident or because of changes that need to be made as a result.
- (3) Remind everyone of certain procedures, i.e. how to deal with the media, inspections, documentation, etc.
- (4) Keep people informed and find out their needs. Do you need counselors? Do they need supplies? Do they need classroom or meeting space?

As with any emergency plan, you can sit down and develop a set of resources to help you through the event. You need to plan for the aftermath as well as the event as what happens afterwards can be just as devastating as the initial event.



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