Seven Things Natural Disaster Teaches Us about Safety, Part 2

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This is part two of a two-part piece. Part one can be found here. *[1]*

4. Preparedness Is the Best Damage Control

In the event of a threat or an actual safety problem, how prepared is your organization? Does everyone know exactly what to do? Do they have the right equipment on hand? Do they know how to use it? Do they know each other and how to coordinate? Have they practiced?

Examine a few disasters of recent or historical note. Colorado Springs has faced a terrible threat and much damage with astounding efficiency, in my opinion and observation, and without injury. Clearly, they have learned to improve communication and coordination between various public service agencies since 9/11 when we learned just how unprepared we were in the U. S. to deal with catastrophe. Compare that preparedness with a recent cruise liner that crashed.

When the Costa Concordia wrecked, the captain and crew were not prepared and did not know how to deal with the situation. As a result, we all bemoaned and ridiculed the whole event both for the fact that it could have been avoided with safer behavior and it could have been better handled with fewer injuries or casualties. Similarly, everything that we observe as wrong that happened with the Costa Concordia happened against policy.

It is not enough to make rules, set procedures and make annual training mandatory. We must practice and rehearse. We must do it regularly. As part of that, we must maintain our supplies and equipment. Do not let the regular activities become mundane. Take your fire drills and first-aid certification renewals very, very seriously.

Practicing and rehearsing seriously does three things. First, it keeps your personnel sharp. Second, it communicates that attitude that safety is king. Third, it creates an opportunity for personnel to assess procedures and recommend improvements. Be prepared at all times. Don't think about "if," take an attitude of "when."

5. Information & Communication Are Your Best Weapons

Whether we are preventing safety issues, or responding to threats or problems, our ability to perceive the threat, organize a preventive measure or response, and share our lessons with everyone else relies on our ability to create information and communicate it. Intelligence is essential.

As you walk your processes and operations today, ask personnel what they know about the procedures, responses, authorities or threats concerning those operations. Ask them whom they tell if they observe a threat or problem. Ask them what they would say.

If personnel don't know about procedures or policy, there is a communication breakdown. If they don't know whom to consult or who has authority, or that they have authority, there is a communication problem. If the answer to the last question is, "Well, I guess I would tell that guy there that the thingy is a little out of whack, and it might cause stuff to go bad," then perhaps a little rehearsal of vocabulary and process and procedure is in order.

The words we use are a strong indicator of our preparedness and our ability to communicate. If we don't know what things are called, or the proper terms for situations, we are clearly not well-versed in the procedure or the operation. When everyone can snap off their answers with the same jargon, we know our teams are rehearsed, and that in an emergency, they are capable of communicating efficiently.

Obviously, we must make sure that we all know to whom to communicate, what to communicate, and how to find and reach those people. Simple things like putting authority on the spot are important. When phone calls are necessary, display the names, numbers and authorities on the phone so no additional time is wasted.

6. Learn from Everything & Everyone

Do not become secure in the knowledge that you and your organization are ready, or that you are safe. Instead, remain positive by patting yourself and your groups on the back for making yourself better and safer, then go forth and try to do it again.

The first attitude breeds an environment of forgetting about safety. The second

attitude creates that environment mentioned above in which everyone is thinking about safety always. Get in the habit of examining every near miss or event in detail and planning for better measures in the future.

Every time there is a process audit, finish the audit, and then ask personnel how it could be improved or made safer. Put a reminder in your calendar. Every month, assess how many safety evaluations or improvements in which you participated or executed. If the answer is none, schedule a review and evaluation of something you haven't touched in a while and do it proactively.

Any time that your organization experiences an event, do a lessons-learned examination, and make improvements and changes. Do the same every time some other group or organization experiences an event. Organizations do benchmark studies of others for the sake of improving product development, marketing, production or logistical practices. Do one on safety practices.

7. Safety Is an Everywhere & Always Concern

Concern and awareness for safety does not just belong on the production floor or at work. Safety is a concern at work, at home and at play. Certainly, of the dozen or more wildfires burning in Colorado this month, people at play triggered the ones not caused by natural occurrences.

Take the thought process one step further. The effects of unsafe behavior also carry beyond the production floor and the workplace. If we are injured, that injury persists and affects every aspect of our lives. It affects our families, our relationships, our ability to produce income, and our self-esteem and self-image. Those are serious things, are they not? Should we not then take our safety seriously, always?

Give some thought to your own business practices this week. Consider not only your policies, but your behaviors and attitudes. Make some changes if you see opportunity, then do it again next month. Just don't stop improving.

I mentioned above the obvious improvement in coordination among public services since 9/11. Though, my family and home are not in one of the evacuation zones for the fire, I happened to be helping a friend and colleague when the evacuation orders for much of the west side went out. I got to participate with the rest of the evacuees.

Both at the time, and in reflection, I am impressed at the decisiveness, preparedness, and coordination of the local authorities and public services. The call to prepare to evacuate went out half-an-hour before the fire jumped a major defense and raced across miles of mountainside toward the city. The minute the fire did jump the defenses, the call to evacuate was issued (observation of potential threat, decisive action and excellent communication).

When the call went out, local law enforcement immediately moved into position to direct traffic. There were no gaps in their posts, there was no fumbling over who should be where. They simply appeared and took care of business. Likewise, as we

were all leaving, caravans of public transportation vehicles were moving in to assist and paramedics were stationing at strategic locations (preparedness and coordination). I was astounded at the efficient coordination of police, fire, paramedics, county sheriff, utilities, media and public transportation resources.

In fact, the only limit I observed to efficient evacuation and response was the road system itself, and the avenues of egress to and from that portion of town. I've been part of numerous business responses to emergencies. Though they were of much smaller scale and lesser threat to personnel and property, none of them were remotely so well-coordinated or addressed. It is with that experience in mind that I share the observations above.

Don't wait for disaster to strike to reevaluate your safety-mindedness. In fact, don't wait at all. Evaluate it today. Assess every aspect of it, including your policies, preparedness, decisiveness, communications, attitudes and your continuous improvement thereof. Take lessons from every opportunity, including your own near misses, natural disasters or web posts.

Stay wise, friends.

What's your take? Please feel free to leave a comment below. To read part one of this two-part series, please click here. [1]If you like what you just read, please find more of Alan's thoughts at www.bizwizwithin.com [2].

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