



Communication crucial after serious incident

Police, OHS investigators won't be the only ones with questions

When there is a serious or fatal incident at your workplace, there is a lot you will have to do as an occupational health and safety professional. Immediate action is needed. What should you do? Who needs to know? What can you say or should you say about it? What else do you need to do? You need to be ready. Preparation is preferred over damage control. You need to develop a plan.

The goal of any critical or serious incident management plan will be to respond completely and appropriately to the incident and get operations back to normal as soon as possible. The plan will help minimize the impact of the incident and ensure the company's obligations with respect to reporting and communication are met. It is not an easy process, but good planning will help ensure a better outcome.

After a serious incident, the first step will be to address the emergency and provide appropriate medical response. Incident reporting will be required, consistent with your company's policy. This will include reporting to the workers' compensation board. If the incident is deemed serious or is an obvious fatality, immediate reporting to the occupational health and safety

authority (OHS) will be required. Your emergency response procedure may also require immediate communication to the senior leadership team.

Outside emergency responders will be required. Their attendance to the scene will trigger attendance by the police. The police will secure the scene and restrict access to it until they complete their investigation. If they confirm the incident was not criminal in nature, they will release the site to OHS who will begin its investigation. Access to the site will be provided after OHS completes its investigation, although you may be granted access to the site along with OHS. This will be up to the government investigators attending to the scene. Your company will then commence its incident investigation process.

SENIOR LEADERSHIP

Once you notify the senior leadership team, the serious incident response process should be put into action. This will include contacting the corporate legal team who should immediately contact the out-of-house legal team. Serious incidents, like fatalities, incidents resulting in employees being hospitalized, fires, floods and

structural collapses are prosecutable offenses in most provinces and territories. Your out-of-house lawyer will likely want to commission a consultant to undertake a third-party investigation of the incident and hold the report under client-solicitor privilege to be used if necessary as part of the prosecution defence.

Notifying the senior leadership team should require implementation of the corporate communications plan. When serious incidents happen, the entire community knows about it almost immediately — including the media. The media has a thirst for — and right to — appropriate and timely information. The reality is that if a mechanism is not created to get them information quickly, reporting will happen anyway and will include speculation, rumour and hearsay. You should also designate one person at the company to deal with the media. Once that is decided, send an email to all employees politely telling them that they are not to speak to the media and that they should direct any media inquiries to the designated person. When it comes to media communications, you need to be proactive if you want the reporting to be accurate.

Notification and communication with the families of the employees involved in the incident will need to happen right away. Someone must call. Figure out who will have this role as part of your plan. Make sure that the person who makes the phone call is good at communicating with people. If you're not a naturally empathetic person, have someone else call. While there is no good way to give bad news, the company needs to manage this carefully to avoid having family members respond viscerally with raw emotion and anger towards the company. As soon as the family hears from you, they will want to get to the hospital if the incident is a serious injury. In the event of a fatal incident, a personal visit with the family will be expected. Before it happens, have a plan for who will be completing this visit.

Your communication plan needs to include the entire employee group. Like the media, they need timely communication. A workplace incident may create an atmosphere of shock across the organization. Considering the psychological well-being of your employees in the wake of such trauma is important to managing morale and helping the company recover faster. A fatal incident may result in widespread feelings of anger, guilt, anxiety, fears for personal safety and the need to find someone to blame. Unfortunately for most companies, production can't stop to allow employees to properly grieve. However, employees close to a fatal incident will require access to short-term counselling services. It will be difficult to predict who else will be most negatively impacted by this type of event, so support and counselling may be required for a broader group of employees. Conduct a supervisor meeting to gauge their responses, get some feedback about how employees are feeling and determine if more specific help is needed. Critical incident stress management may require outside help.

The sad reality is that having a serious incident at work is more likely than you think. Five employees die on Canadian work sites every day. A fatal incident at work will have far-reaching consequences on employee morale, production and the bottom-line. With proper planning, the financial, emotional and logistical fallout from sudden, serious workplace incidents can be minimized.

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