Contents

Section I – Handling Emergency Situation in your Workplace

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 3

Keys to Success ........................................................................................................... 3
  Anticipating Emergencies ....................................................................................... 3
  Planning for Emergencies ....................................................................................... 4
    Notification (Emergency Alert) ............................................................................. 4
    Limit Employee Exposure ..................................................................................... 4
    Hazard Control, and Equipment and/or Process Shutdown ............................... 5
    Medical Treatment ............................................................................................... 5
    Cleanup and Startup Operations ......................................................................... 5
  Training of Employees ............................................................................................. 6

Summary ....................................................................................................................... 6

Worksheet ...................................................................................................................... 6
  Fire ............................................................................................................................. 7
  Medical and First Aid ............................................................................................... 7
  Specific Emergencies at your Workplace ................................................................. 8

Section II – A System For Employees to Report Hazardous Conditions

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 9

Keys to Success ........................................................................................................... 9
  Policy on Notification .............................................................................................. 9
  Hazard Reports ......................................................................................................... 9
  Take Action ............................................................................................................... 10
  Follow-up .................................................................................................................. 10

Summary ....................................................................................................................... 10

Worksheet ...................................................................................................................... 11
  Policy on Reporting Hazards ................................................................................... 11
  Employee Report of Unsafe Conditions ................................................................. 12
  Follow-up Documentation ........................................................................................ 13
Handling Emergency Situation in Your Workplace

Introduction

- One of your employees trips on the stairs and falls. One arm is broken and there may be a back injury. The employee is unconscious.
- Your forklift operator is moving a 55-gallon drum of volatile acid into the workplace. In the process the drum is ruptured and 40 gallons spill onto the floor.
- An employee operating a degreaser accidentally drops in some metal pieces that are hot from machining. The degreasing agent splashes, erupting into flames and spreading fire in one corner of the building.

Imagine that right now, one of these incidents occurs. Look at your watch and count down three minutes. What happens in the next three minutes will be critical in determining the outcome of the emergency. Do your employees have enough training in medical procedures to care for an injured employee without inflicting additional damage? How your employees respond to medical emergencies may permanently affect someone’s life.

In your countdown one minute has gone by. Have you or any other managers been notified of a problem yet? What are your employees doing to shut down equipment, stop the spread of fire on chemicals in the plant, or protect themselves from further exposure to a hazardous situation? Now imagine two minutes have gone by. Is there a need for outside assistance such as an ambulance or the fire department? If so, have they been notified and are employees taking proper steps in the interim to contain the situation or protect themselves?

Now, three minutes have elapsed. How is the unconscious employee with the broken arm and possible back injury? Has the injury been made worse by untrained employees moving the individual? When the acid spilled, did employees know to put on proper respiratory protection before attempting to clean up the spill? Or do you now have four employees with severe respiratory distress due to an overexposure to acid gases? What about the fire? Has it been put out, or has it spread to the rest of the building? Are any employees trapped? Is the fire department on its way?

Keys to Success

Anticipating Emergencies

The first step in handling emergencies is to anticipate what types of emergencies could arise at your workplace. The potential emergencies and their chances of occurring depends on your work environment and the operations and processes occurring there. A safety and health survey will help you identify hazards and eliminate or control them so that accidents and emergencies do not
arise. However, even with these preventive measures, you are gambling to assume that an emergency situation will never arise in your facility. Identify emergencies, which could conceivably happen, then begin to make plans for the swiftest possible control of each.

**Planning for Emergencies**

There are five major issues to consider when planning responses to emergencies. These issues should be considered in relation to each other, particularly when deciding whether to address them in a sequential order, whether they require simultaneous attention, or if some issues need not be addressed at all.

Remember as you address each issue to keep in mind the specific factors involved in your workplace and **tailor your plan accordingly**.

**Notification** (Emergency Alert)

You need to design a system so that any employee who notices an emergency situation developing can notify you or other management personnel. Even though your staff may be involved in containing a hazard or removing employees from exposure, you need to be made aware of potential problems as early as possible. Based on the possible emergencies identified in the hazard assessment of your facility, you will need to determine where alarms should be placed and at what point you should be called. Obviously you would not want to have employees alerting management every time a problem arises, but you should be made aware of a potential emergency at the beginning.

The employer shall explain to each employee the preferred means of reporting emergencies, such as manual pull box alarms, public address systems, radio or telephones. The employer shall post emergency telephone numbers near telephones, or employee notice boards, and other conspicuous locations when telephones serve as a means of reporting emergencies. Where a communication system also serves as the employee alarm system, all emergency messages shall have priority over all non-emergency messages.

**Limit Employee Exposure**

Depending on the type of emergency, you may need to limit both the number of employees exposed and the extent of exposure. Partial or total evacuation of the building, or the use of appropriate personal protective equipment, may be necessary. In any event, focus your emergency response efforts on limiting employee exposure to the emergency hazard. This includes protecting employees who may be exposed to a hazard while trying to assist in an emergency (i.e., putting out a fire, rescuing a worker, cleaning up a chemical spill, etc.).
Hazard Control, and Equipment and/or Process Shutdown

In planning for hazard control, first consider any regulations that specify required actions for fire control, lockout, evacuation, etc.

Depending on the type of emergency or hazard, you may determine that your employees can take action to control the hazard without endangering themselves. For example, employees may be able to extinguish a fire in the early stages, thereby removing the hazard. In other instances, you would need outside assistance. In some emergencies, employees may only be able to contain the hazard until the outside help arrives, or until subsequent actions can be taken to control or remove the hazard. In the case of chemical exposure emergencies, specific actions are necessary to contain spills and prevent employee exposure.

You may need to provide a procedure for shutting off equipment or shutting down work processes, either at their locations or by remote control. The reasons for such a shutdown might be to make it easier or safer for hazard control (such as fire fighting efforts) or to prevent other hazards from appearing (such as problems that might occur when machines are still running during a gas leak).

Medical Treatment

Occasionally an accident will happen which requires emergency medical treatment. The extent of medical care that can be provided onsite will depend on the expertise of your staff. It may be a good idea to provide them with general first aid or CPR training, or prepare them to respond to injuries or illnesses that could occur from the specific condition in your workplace. Even with comprehensive treatment available offsite in an industrial clinic or hospital, your staff could still be trained to give initial treatment to stabilize victims and prepare them for transport. In some cases, the types of potential hazards at your facility suggest the need to keep basic life support systems such as oxygen onsite. It is important to identify your nearest emergency resource and the actual response time to your facility as well as the response time for backup providers.

Cleanup and Startup Operations

Occasionally a need for workplace cleanup operations develops after a hazard is brought under control and before normal operations can resume. In the event of a chemical spill, for example, the chemical needs to be cleaned up and disposed of properly. A little thought before these cleanup operations begin can prevent additional employee exposure to the same or different hazards. Try to anticipate these needs and design protective measures for employees in advance.

The same reasoning applies to startup operations. The process of starting up equipment or production can create hazards in addition to the problem that led to the shutdown. You need to carefully think through the startup procedures to make sure that no problems will arise, or design procedures that will make the operations safe for your employees.
Training of Employees

All of your work to anticipate emergencies and plan appropriate response won’t help much unless you train your supervisors and employees to carry out your plans. This is the essence of training: to let people know what they need to accomplish and what the employer expects of each of them. You may need initial training on the hazards you anticipate and the response procedures you have planned. A second phase may also be needed to develop the specific skills and capabilities in your employees that they need to carry out those procedures and provide opportunities for drills.

Your emergency procedures can be more effective if you delegate certain tasks or responsibilities to individual employees and train them in these areas. For example, should you make one person in each department or section responsible for notifying management of potential emergencies or for telephoning the fire department? Your decision on this assignment of responsibilities will depend on the organization of your entity and the capabilities of your employees.

Summary

Being prepared for workplace emergencies involves three key steps:

1. Anticipate what might happen
2. Plan what you will do in response to an emergency
3. Train your employees so they know what to do

Thorough preparation for emergencies includes developing a plan for each type of emergency situation that could arise in your workplace, whether that is a fire emergency, a medical emergency, or one that could result from the materials or equipment used in your organization. Remember that once an emergency occurs, it’s too late to stop and plan. Thorough and carefully advance planning is the key to managing emergency situations.

Worksheet

The following worksheet is a series of questions that will help you anticipate fire, medical, or other emergencies and plan appropriate responses. It is meant to be a general guideline for any type of workplace and should be tailored to your own needs.
Fire

Every facility should be prepared for the possibility of a fire. Although fires can start from many causes, you can determine the most probable causes of fire and where fires are most likely to start in your workplace by answering the following questions:

1. What kinds of flammable materials do you have in your workplace? Make a list of the major flammable materials. Remember to include items such as flammable liquids and major electrical components as well as those items normally though of, such as paper or wood.

2. Where, and in what quantities, are these materials located? On the list of flammable materials that you just made, identify areas of the workplace that contain concentrations of these materials. You may find it helpful to mark these areas and materials on a floor plan, or make a second list that describes each area of the workplace and the materials it contains.

3. What major source of ignition do you have in your workplace? How far are they from where the flammable materials are located? Have you taken action to control these under normal circumstances?

4. Do you have any chemicals or hazardous materials that would pose special problems during a fire? For example, will any materials tend to explode if ignited or heated, or will they release toxic gases, vapors or particles which require personal protective equipment? Do you have any radioactive material? List these materials separately, along with specific information on the type of hazard involved and conditions under which a problem would occur. For example, at what temperature will the materials become explosive?

Medical and First Aid

As with fire emergencies, you need to anticipate and prepare for general first aid and medical needs. Some workplaces can also have special needs for medical care. Answers to the following questions can help you determine what you need:

1. Do you employ anyone who has an existing medical problem, which may require special care? For example, someone with epilepsy, hemophilia, or heart disease? Although as an employer you may not be aware of existing conditions such as these and discrimination against such workers is prohibited, you can explain to workers why you desire such medical information and then ask them to let you know of any relevant medical problems.

2. Are there any chemicals or hazardous materials in your worksite that would create medical problems? Make a list of chemicals and materials used and the accompanying health effects which result from exposure. Information from chemical manufacturers or Material Safety Data Sheets, which describe various substances and how to use them safely, may be helpful for this.

3. Collaborate with your emergency resources in identifying potential problems and exposures at your workplace.
Specific Emergencies at Your Workplace

Finally, in addition to fire and medical emergencies, you may have processes or materials at your workplace which can prevent very specific hazards. The following questions are designed to identify those hazards:

1. What type of accident or emergency could result if employees failed to follow specific safe work procedures or rules you established? Look at each rule, guideline, and practice which you have implemented. If any or all employees failed to follow your directions, list the possible outcomes. Are any special outcomes identified beyond a fire or accident requiring first aid? If so, list those.

2. Do you have any chemicals, materials, or processes in your workplace that could lead to other types of emergency situations? For example, do you have any radioactive materials, or chemicals, which are hazardous if accidentally mixed together, such as acid and cyanide? Or do you have any processes which could cause explosions, releases of chemicals, etc.? To identity these hazards types you should look at manufacturers’ directions and specifications, and information on Material Safety Data Sheets.

By answering all of the above questions as completely and thoroughly as possible, you should now have a list, specific to your workplace of hazards that could cause an emergency. You can now use it as a basis for planning your response to each kind of emergency and for training your employees to respond properly. Emergency assistance personnel such as fire fighters or hospital staff should also keep this information readily available for use.
A System For Employees to Report Hazardous Conditions

Introduction

Employees play a key role in helping you control the hazards that may occur, or already exist in your workplace. A reliable system for employees to report these conditions is an important aspect of an effective safety and health program.

Since our organization is unique, you will need to develop a method for employees to report known hazards, potential hazards, or hazardous conditions which is consistent with the policies and procedures of your company. If no system for reporting these hazards exists, then the simplest and most practical method would probably involved the employee’s first-line supervisor, or the person to whom the employee reports. The key person plays an important role in make the system work. It also involves the person (or perhaps several persons) in the organization who eliminates the hazard, or makes sure that corrective measures are taken.

Keys to Success

Policy on Notification

The first step in developing a successful notification system is to establish a policy about employee involvement in this program. You have already made a commitment toward establishing an effective safety and health program which includes a safety policy, objectives, defined responsibilities, and commitment of resources. Now it is time to get our employees involved. Tell them that any hazards which they observe or suspect exist must be reported to their supervisor. You will want to make it clear that the safety of the workplace depends on their reports, and that they have nothing to fear from reporting hazards. Put your policy in writing, read it to your employees (or have your supervisor do so), and give them a copy to reinforce the policy. Provide your supervisors with instructions on how they should implement this new policy in the workplace and work toward full employee involvement.

Hazard Reports

Next, develop a written system for documenting reported hazards. You can do this in two ways.

- While most small business will find that a verbal reporting system works well, you may want to develop a form for employees to notify you or their supervisors of hazardous conditions. This type of form serves as a record of the notification, and also protects the employee who may want to file an anonymous report. Include on the form space to report the time and date, the location of the hazard, and a description of the problem. You may also want to ask the employee’s recommended corrective actions.

- The other procedure would be for employees to file verbal reports, then the supervisor would complete a written hazard report. The supervisor’s report would also describe the hazard and indicate what action is being taken or is
planned to correct or eliminate it. You could also combine these forms into one, as illustrated in the worksheet. In order for your notification system to work, you must take all hazard reports seriously. Remember that it is a hazard to the employee who reports it, even if it is not a hazard to the supervisor, or to you.

**Take Action**

After a hazard has been reported, you will want to assess whether it actually exists and determine what it means in light of your workplace operations. Decide what must be done to correct the hazard and to protect employees until the hazard report, you will set a priority on when you can eliminate the hazard based on your available resources (time, money, manpower, etc.) and other commitments. If the hazard can’t be corrected immediately, develop an action plan on how you will eliminate it. Part of this action plan includes a report back to the employee to let him or her know your assessment and what you are going to do about it. This lets your employees know that their reports are taken seriously.

**Follow-up**

After you have carried out your action plan and eliminated the hazard, or when some action has been taken to educate the employee about why the condition was not considered hazardous, you will want to follow up on the action taken. You or your supervisor need to check to make sure that the corrective action worked and continues to work. Documentation of their action assures you that the necessary steps were taken to provide your employees with the protection they need. Also, this documentation helps to develop a history of your operations which can be reviewed by new supervisors, or can even be used as topics in safety discussions or training sessions to help ensure that the hazard does not recur.

**Summary**

Remember these important points:

- Develop a practical way for the employee to report the hazard directly (preferably verbal).
- Insist on a written report from the supervisor about the condition.
- Evaluate the hazard report and assign it a priority.
- Develop an action plan.
- Implement the plan, making sure that you let the employee know what action you’ve taken.
- Follow up or review the effectiveness of the action you took.
- Document the action taken for use in the future.
Worksheet

An effective employee notification system is usually very simple. It consists of letting your employees know how to report hazards and why it’s important to do so, then developing short forms to report the hazards and document the action taken. This worksheet provides examples of these statements and forms to give you an idea of what might work well in your organization.

Policy on Reporting Hazards

As you all know, your safety and well-being are extremely important to me. To make sure that all potential hazards are eliminated before anyone becomes sick or injured while at work, I have established a (new) policy.

Anyone who suspects that a hazard exists, or who notices any unsafe work practices, shall report it to (SUPERVISOR)_____________________ immediately.

Evaluation of this report will be made and you will be notified about the action taken to eliminate the condition.
# Employee Report of Unsafe Condition

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<th>Employee</th>
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**Employee: Complete and Give to Supervisor**

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<td>Department:</td>
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<th>Date:</th>
<th>Action Taken:</th>
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**Supervisor: Complete and Give to Manager**

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<th>___________________________</th>
<th>Signature of Manager</th>
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<td>___________________________</td>
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### Follow-up Documentation

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<th>Hazard:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possible Injury or Illness:</td>
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<td>Exposure:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duration:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interim Protection Provided:</td>
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<td>Corrective Action Taken:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Required Time for Corrective Action:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cost of Eliminating the Hazard:</td>
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<td>Retaining Provided:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Follow-up Check Made on:</td>
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<td>Any additional action taken?</td>
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_______________________________  
Signature of Manager or Supervisor
_________________________________  Date