

Code Red: Preparing for the Inevitable Emergency

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When it comes to emergency preparedness, few could argue with letting “better safe than sorry” be the succinct, no-nonsense maxim that guides your overall approach. That tried-and-true statement helps remind us to look both ways when crossing the street, wear a seatbelt while driving, and dump out that half gallon of milk just beyond its expiration date (though we might be excused if we were a little less paranoid about the milk issue).

An emergency is defined simply as a serious, unexpected, and often dangerous situation requiring immediate action. Responding safely and effectively to an emergency requires thoughtful advance planning, streamlined procedures, trained staff, and capable leaders. Emergency preparedness is about planning for the worst and hoping for the best.

Planning

Just because you can’t possibly plan for everything doesn’t mean you needn’t plan for anything at all. Businesses of all kinds face common emergency situations every day, such as power outages, refrigeration failures, missing children, and severe weather events. While more severe incidents, such as fires, chemical spills, robberies, and active shooter situations are much less likely, they too, unfortunately, do still happen.

The inherent unpredictability of an incident occurring doesn’t make the particulars of the possible event any less familiar. It is those particulars that we can and should plan for.

In his now infamous 2002 statement, surprisingly astute although a little clumsy, former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld noted: “There are known knowns. There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we now know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don’t know.”

In every iteration of the ‘known unknown’ theme, there lies the added certainty that we can’t know everything—especially the things we don’t even know we don’t know.

Be that as it may, we can at the very least plan for what we do know and what we can reasonably expect—and perhaps find ourselves organized, nimble, and capable enough to respond effectively even to the ‘unknown unknowns’ that may sneak up on us.

Having a reliable, accessible, comprehensive, and user-friendly collection of detailed, step-by-step emergency response procedures is essential in improving your team’s ability to respond quickly, confidently, and effectively. Providing critical tools and information—such as emergency contact information, an up-to-date list of emergency service providers, and the necessary documentation forms at your staff’s fingertips—takes much of the uncertainty and indecision out of the equation.

Keeping these plans, procedures, and information out-of-date and tucked away in a file cabinet doesn’t do anyone any good. Building emergency preparedness into your safety and security culture means reliably updating your resources as needed; auditing them annually for accuracy and consistency; consolidating them into a well-organized, accessible, reproducible resource; locating copies strategically throughout your store; and training your staff on how to access and use them most effectively.

Training

Responding to an emergency involves much more than simply accessing the step-by-step procedures. Many of those steps will involve tools, supplies, materials, and specialized equipment necessary to successfully perform the response procedures as they are outlined. Training your staff on proper use of fire extinguishers, eye-wash stations, paging systems, biohazard cleanup kits, personal protective equipment, etc., is essential in averting potential incidents and in responding effectively when they do occur.

Businesses should familiarize staff with emergency response procedures and resources as part of any broad safety and security training. Even your seasoned employees will need to become familiar with where your updated resources are located, what information can be found there, and how best to approach emergency situations.

Training your staff in how to respond to emergencies and what your step-by-step procedures are doesn’t mean they need to know it all by heart. But they do need to know the information is there, how to access and interpret it, what the general protocols are for responding to emergencies, and how to use the tools needed to respond effectively.

Communication

Every co-op should set up an emergency paging code system. In the event of an emergency, the store’s paging system is used to quickly inform your entire staff of the nature of the emergency situation and get an immediate response. Codes should be established for fire, lost child, medical emergency, and store security emergency. In each instance, the page announcement will initiate your established response procedures.

For instance, in the event that a lost child is reported to one of your staff, they would:

- announce “Code yellow” over the paging system three times, followed by the child’s age, clothing, and last place seen (do not use the term “lost child”);
- escort the reporting parent or guardian to the customer service desk, if not already there;
- a customer service employee should remain with the parent/guardian at the customer service desk;

- employees throughout store begin searching for the missing child in their immediate vicinity/department.

In addition, the manager(s) on duty or a customer service employee should assign employees to actively search and stand watch at entrance, exit, and off-stage areas (coolers, freezers, upstairs, backroom, receiving, restrooms).

Further steps—how to respond when the child is found, if the child is seen leaving the store, or if the child is found with another adult—are all detailed in your emergency response procedures in which your staff have been trained. When the child is found and returned to safely to their parent or guardian, staff would use the paging system to announce “Code yellow—resolved,” communicating to all staff to call off the search.

All staff should be trained on how to deliver a page, and how to respond if a page is heard. This simple communication tool can save precious time in responding to an emergency, thus making your response that much more likely to be successful.

Leadership

Your written procedures are meant to help guide any staff person in responding effectively. While most staff will not be required to know the details of those procedures inside and out, your management team should have a much better grasp of your emergency response policies and procedures, allowing them to lead a response as competently and efficiently as possible.

Managers on duty, department managers, and any safety and security staff should all be required to have a sharper and more comprehensive understanding of your emergency response procedures including their roles in both responding directly and in leading an effective response and reporting protocol.

Known knowns

Start with what you know. Create simple, strategic, comprehensive response procedures for the most likely emergency situations, then branch out a bit to some of the less likely and plan for those as well. Establish reliable procedures and maintain fully operational and readily accessible tools that are needed when responding to an emergency.

Planning ahead ensures you and your staff are prepared to respond quickly and efficiently to a wide array of possible emergency situations—and you are better positioned to guarantee the safety and security of your employees and customers, the viability of your products, and the security of your store.

There will always be known unknowns, and even those dreaded unknown unknowns. Preemptive planning, training, and awareness means being able to trust that your systems are dialed in, and the staff is prepared to thoughtfully respond to almost anything. The staff has a keen appreciation of what practical and effective response looks like and the tools and experience to adapt and respond successfully. •

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