



Catastrophic Workplace Accidents: It Could Happen To You

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While the American workplace is safer than ever, hardly a week goes by without a news report concerning a plant explosion, a chemical release or a fatality arising out of a workplace accident.

Anytime a fatality or catastrophic accident arises in the workplace, the employer will have to deal with at least three distinct audiences. First, most catastrophic incidents will initiate a government investigation as to the cause. Second, the employer is likely to be inundated by the news media as they attempt to cover the "breaking story." Finally, and most importantly, there will be a need to communicate with grieving survivors, whether they are family members of the deceased employees, eyewitnesses to the incident, or simply co-workers who feel a sense of loss when their contemporaries are killed or injured. How does an employer prepare to deal with these competing needs from these different audiences and effectively deal with the workplace fatality or catastrophic accident?

The answer can be summarized in one word -- preparation. Every employer must not only prepare, but anticipate each potential workplace emergency before it occurs.

An emergency action plan should include:

- The preferred method of reporting the emergency or accident
- An evacuation policy, including emergency escape procedures and route assignments
- A list of contacts both inside and outside the facility that includes telephone numbers and email addresses
- A list of agencies and emergency personnel who should be contacted
- Procedures for employees that remain for shutdown of critical operations
- Assignment of rescue and medical duties either inside or outside the facility
- Designation of assembly areas and procedures to account for employees
- Sites of alternative communication centers and operation procedures
- Methods to alert employees of an evacuation, which also includes the evacuation of disabled employees

Employers can effectively deal with workplace fatalities and catastrophic accidents, but only through proper planning and execution. It is virtually impossible for an employer to deal with all the competing audiences which assemble during a catastrophic accident or fatality without proper planning. In fact, effective planning may help reduce the pain and suffering suffered by the surviving family and co-workers, while at the same time allow the employer to resume normal operations quicker and reduce the financial and potential legal burdens placed on the company.

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