A TED Talk's Roadmap for Staying Calm When an Active Shooter's at the Door

Insights
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An armed gunman just entered your workplace. You're under stress. What is the first thing you and your management team do?

Does someone call the police?
Do you run? Fight? Hide?
Is there a security guard? What does he or she do?
What do your employees do?
Do you know the precise, step-by-step actions that you would take?
Do you have a system in place to minimize the likelihood of a catastrophe?
How do you handle the stress?

Several recent terrorist attacks shocked the U.S. and the world. A December 2, 2015 massive shooting in San Bernardino, California was especially frightening, not only because it occurred on American soil, but because it happened at a workplace during a holiday party. It reminded us that workplaces are not a sanctuary from tragedies. They can happen anywhere, to any employer.

San Bernardino led to a flood of calls to our workplace safety attorneys seeking advice on preparation for such emergencies. Clients wondered how do they prepare? How do they train their employees? What written emergency response program is required?

In many circumstances OSHA requires employers to implement an emergency action plan ("EAP") to handle responses to these situations. While some employers believe they're immune from this mandate, its application is broader than most believe.

Emergency Action Plans
A written emergency action plan must be implemented by employers with over 10 employees when required under one of several OSHA standards that trigger EAP obligations, such as

- Process Safety Management (29 CFR 1910.119),
- Grain Handling (29 CFR 1910.272), and
- Ethylene Oxide (29 CFR 1910.1047).

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In addition, if fire extinguishers are required or provided in your workplace, and if anyone will be evacuating during a fire or other emergency, OSHA (29 CFR 1910.157) requires you to have an EAP. (If you have less than 10 employees, you can communicate an EAP orally)

At a minimum, the EAP must include the following elements set out in 29 CFR 1910.38(c)):

- the means of reporting fires and other emergencies;
- evacuation procedures and emergency escape route assignments;
- procedures for employees who remain to operate critical plant operations before they evacuate;
- accounting for all employees after an emergency evacuation has been completed; rescue and medical duties for employees performing them; and
- names or job titles of persons who can be contacted.

Would your EAP cover an active shooter situation?

Is your EAP broad enough to cover management of an active shooter situation? Do employees know what to do if such an emergency arose? Have you rehearsed your response to such a situation?

More importantly, do you and your management employees know how to handle the stress of this type of situation?

A TED Talk's Roadmap for Emergency Management

In his dynamic TED talk entitled "How to Stay Calm when you Know You'll be Stressed," found here, Daniel Levitin recalls the stress he experienced after locking himself out of his home and nearly missing an international flight. The eight-hour flight, during which he never slept because his tardiness led to his reassignment to a seat near the lavatory, gave Levitin time to ponder systems to handle stress under emergency circumstances. He wondered if we could attempt to mimic such stress before the emergency arose, so that stress would not affect our decision-making skills once the incident actually occurred.

Levitin questions why organizations conduct "post-mortem" examinations of disasters after the accident occurs to see what went wrong, but nearly never perform a "pre-mortem" analysis. In a "pre-mortem" examination, companies can look ahead and try to "figure out all the things that could go wrong, and then try to figure out what you can do to prevent those things from happening, or to minimize the damage."

When you're under stress, Levitin claims, the brain releases "cortisol, a toxic, which causes cloudy thinking." A "pre-mortem" analysis recognizes that "under stress you're not going to be at your best, and you should put systems in place." "The idea is to think ahead to what those failures might be" and prepare for them.

Implementing Lessons from Levitin's Talk into Your EAP

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Levitin's talk shows us that a written EAP alone is not be enough to handle an emergency like an active shooter situation. In addition to having a written program, ensure your employees know exactly what to do if an emergency occurs. Rehearse these situations. Have a list of tasks for each employee to conduct once an incident arises. Make sure every task that must be completed during a response is considered.

More importantly, simulate the stressful environment that accompanies an emergency before it actually occurs. In your rehearsals, go over the things that could go wrong:

No one can reach a phone.
A key member of management is injured.
The primary exit route is blocked.
An alarm system is disabled.
The active shooter is an employee.

As Levitin explains, mimicking these stressful situations will better prepare your management to handle an emergency situation. Preparing to handle issues and make decisions while under stress will help keep your team safe.

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