

It Didn't Start Out as a Disaster

/ BY MICHAEL CALLAN

Disasters don't just happen. They grow from uncontrolled hazards. We plan for these occasions and they are called All Hazards Contingency Plans. Hazards are materials or conditions of elevated risk. All hazards exist in two conditions: controlled and uncontrolled. Certainly, gasoline flowing from a pipeline, natural gas coming from a broken meter, or a downed power line is no longer controlled. The magnitude of the problem is a combination of the inherent hazard, the integrity of the container, or the location of the event.

Problems usually start as an incident or emergency. There is a distinct difference between incident and emergency. An incident is usually a minor event or condition that interrupts normal procedures. Incidents are situations that are no longer normal or controlled. Most incidents are such that an individual can solve the problem. Incidents can even wait an hour or

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two until a maintenance individual comes and corrects the problem. Emergencies, however, can't wait! An emergency is a serious situation or occurrence that happens unexpectedly. An emergency demands immediate action or creates a condition with an urgent need for response. You have to deal with it right now. In fact, if you don't address it "right now," most emergencies will grow.

How do incidents become emergencies? Incidents escalate because of poor decision making. Employees haven't recognized, or are even aware, that there is a problem. Some actually refuse to identify an incident as an emergency for fear they did something wrong. Instead, they try to handle it themselves and are quickly overwhelmed, or worse, overcome. The fastest way to go from an incident to an emergency is a simple concept: The failure to notify a supervisor or follow procedures.

Even in the emergency response community, not following procedures is a sure way for an emergency to proceed to the next level, which is a crisis; a crucial or decisive point or situation in the event. Crises are turning points or emotionally stressful situations. Any dramatic change in an emergency is a good indication a crisis is occurring. If there are injuries and/or fatalities, you have a crisis!

When any crisis is mismanaged you are on your way to a disaster. A disaster is a calamitous event, especially one occurring suddenly, and can cause great loss of life, damage, or hardship. Crises escalate to disasters because leadership has lost control or is overwhelmed

by the magnitude of the event brought about by the lack of planning, preparation, procedures, training, or even practice. A disaster involves the entire community.

There is still one more level – an incident of national significance (INS). This is an actual or potentially high-impact event that requires a coordinated and effective response by federal, state, local, tribal, non-governmental, and/or private sector entities. Frankly, with all those agencies potentially involved, a suggested coordinated and effective response seems to be asking too much. However, the group's goal in an INS is to save lives, minimize damage, and provide the basis for long-term community recovery and mitigation activities. Past notable incidents of national significance have names like Bhopal, New Orleans, and Hurricane Katrina.

In closing, what needs to be done? Re-examine your emergency plans. Always look for weaknesses. I recommend focusing on six points of concern, or the "Six P's" of an effective plan:

- Policy
- Procedures
- Prevention
- Performance
- Preparedness
- Practice

But that's for another article. Good Luck! 

Michael Callan is the recipient of many industry awards and the author of multiple textbooks used by the utility industry for training of emergency responders. He has conducted hundreds of training events throughout the United States on multiple subjects for Industrial and Municipal Haz-Mat Teams. Interested in learning more? See Michael's upcoming webinar schedule at ExcavationSafetyUniversity.com, as well as his highly-acclaimed workshops offered at CGAconference.com. Michael can be reached at mcallan@att.net.

