

Emergency Response Plans

A Key to Effective Crisis Management

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You just received an urgent call that one of your company's cargo planes aborted its takeoff and skidded off a runway at a major international airport. You turn on the news and see a video of smoke rising from the aircraft. Almost immediately, emails and phone calls from the press asking for comments fill your inbox, and social media is abuzz. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) announces it is launching a "Go Team" that will arrive at the accident scene in three hours. Your CEO wants the executive team to assemble in the boardroom immediately. What do you do? Who do you call first? Is anyone injured? What do your employees at the airport need to do? Are they safe?

Implementing an Emergency Response Plan (ERP) will help your company navigate such a scenario. But what is an Emergency Response Plan? An ERP is a critical risk-management tool for air carriers, airports or any company involved in aviation. An ERP serves as a company's response blueprint in the unfortunate case of an accident or other serious incident that could involve catastrophic financial, environmental or material damage, and/or major loss of life. It can help an organization cope with a crisis, such as in the scenario presented above, in a methodical and deliberate fashion. An effective ERP outlines the steps the company, particularly its key employees, should take in response to these types of events and will help to minimize the company's damages.

The ERP is a manual that contains information on who to contact, actions to take and resources to use in case of an emergency. The main priorities of a company's ERP are (1) protection, (2) safe conduct, (3) mitigation/stabilization of the dangerous condition and (4) cleanup of the incident (physical and/or conceptual). These priorities include, (a) supporting company personnel and families, (b) working with authorities to provide life safety support to affected personnel, (c) proactively responding with sufficient resources to professionally support affected parties, (d) professionally managing and protecting company resources, and (e) determining what occurred and modifying procedures as necessary to prevent recurrence, where possible.

An effective ERP should contain, at minimum: A list of people and/or departments to contact, with contact numbers. The safety duties and responsibilities of each designated emergency response personnel and company department for a given emergency. Actions required to maintain safety and mitigate danger. If applicable, actions required to clean up the incident, work with outside parties, including employee families, NTSB and other investigators, media, outside counsel, etc.

Understanding what resources are best used to mitigate the emergency, as well as when and how to appropriately deploy those resources.

Before developing an ERP, a company should consider the potential risks presented by its operations and the various roles that its personnel will play in the event of an emergency. Generally, the ERP lays out the company's accident response organization and describes the overall response strategy. For example, an ERP establishes the responsibilities of the Emergency Response Team, which controls the emergency response, as well as the duties of the company's various departments involved in the response, including Operations, Safety, Legal, Human Resources, Financial and Public Affairs. Although the ERP designates different responsibilities to separate departments within the company, the purpose of the ERP is to assist the departments in functioning together as a team in order to effectuate the best possible response.

Before finalizing an ERP, the plan should be tested to ensure the necessary components are in place and operational. The company should run tabletop exercises to make sure its various personnel are comfortable with their roles and that the plan functions as intended. The company also should develop an action plan to address each of the shortcomings of the ERP and implement procedures to correct them. An ERP is not a static document – it should be reviewed and re-reviewed on a periodic basis and updated as needed. ERPs can be reviewed internally or as part of a coordinated effort with outside operational or emergency support providers. Drills, which focus on single procedures, and tabletop exercises, which are broader in scope and focus on roles, policies and strategies, should be performed annually.

Integrated exercises, which are even broader in scope and test the integrated response to a simulated large-scale emergency involving outside organizations, should be performed at least every three years. These exercises will help ensure that the ERP's capability is adequate, determine whether operational changes are needed, and identify areas of improvement. ERPs should be updated for any lessons learned through exercises.

When accidents happen, learn and adapt. Real-world experience is invaluable in assessing the effectiveness of a company's ERP. When the NTSB is first notified of a major accident, such as the scenario presented at the outset of this article, it quickly assembles and dispatches a "Go Team" to the accident site and collects as many facts as possible to determine the circumstances surrounding the accident. The NTSB in the case above would determine such things as why the cargo plane had to abandon its takeoff, what caused the plane to skid off the runway, what caused the plane to catch fire, whether any specific components of the plane were faulty, whether the pilots were distracted or impaired and whether the pilots took appropriate actions before and during the

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emergency and what actions were taken by the airplane's crew following the accident. A company should quickly accept an invitation from the NTSB to be a party representative to an accident investigation. The company will have the opportunity to propose and review field notes created by its assigned working group and to make comments on draft reports before they are finalized and become part of the public record. The company and its employees will want to pay close attention to how the investigation is being conducted. Who was involved in the recovery efforts? What measures were taken to preserve and document the physical evidence? What happened during each day or event, and what follow-up analysis was (or should have been) conducted? The company's team will want to have its eyes and ears open, to learn as much information as possible under the NTSB's direction and without interfering with the NTSB's essential and overriding function.

After the investigation is concluded, the NTSB ultimately prepares a report that analyzes the investigative record in detail and identifies the probable cause(s) of the accident. As the company should have been involved in the investigative process, its employees will be equipped with firsthand training and knowledge that can be used to adjust and improve its ERP. An ERP is a vital component of a company's aviation operations. By preparing an ERP, practicing it, reviewing and re-reviewing it, you can be assured that your company will be properly equipped before an emergency occurs. Although every crisis is unique, in the unfortunate event of an accident, an ERP will guide your company's response from

when the accident happens until the NTSB publishes its final report, thereby minimizing confusion and wasted effort when you can least afford it. It is critical to retain experienced aviation counsel when preparing or reviewing an ERP to ensure it covers all possible facets of a crisis situation. Aviation counsel can also provide assistance in the case of an actual emergency, including advice on interacting with the NTSB, the media and others.

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