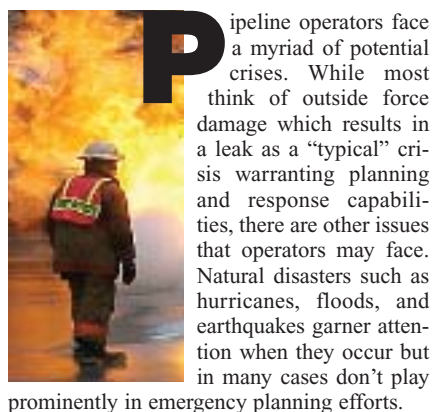


CRISIS MANAGEMENT: The Need For A Comprehensive Approach

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prominently in emergency planning efforts.

Add to the mix intentional acts, employee accidents, reduction of supply, financial issues or loss of senior leaders. While not pleasant, all of these occurrences are plausible and speak to the need for comprehensive crisis management programs.

Comprehensive crisis management is a cyclical activity. It begins with a thorough analysis of the risks faced by the operator. Each threat analysis is unique and is based on several factors such as the structure and operations of the organization, natural hazards risks, and security issues.

After identifying the risks faced by the organization, the next step is to establish a crisis management structure. In most cases, this manifests itself in the form of a crisis management team or committee. This group should be comprised of a cross section of members representing areas that would be tasked during a crisis.

While operations functions would certainly need representation, consideration should be given to support areas such as human resources, communications, legal, safety, and environmental and others. All entities that have a definable role in the event of a crisis should have a seat at the table.

The next step in the cycle is the development of a comprehensive crisis response plan based on the previously conducted risk analysis. A crisis response plan should not be confused with emergency response procedures that are tactical in nature. For example, the pipeline safety regulations specified in 49 CFR 192.615 require operators to develop specific response plans in the event of a pipeline emergency.

A comprehensive crisis response plan strategically supports the execution of emergency response plans and procedures. It is not intended to subjugate those existing response plans or procedures that provide tactical guidance and are facility or asset specific.

The focus of the crisis response plan should be on defining what constitutes a crisis for the organization and what is the correlating notification process and response to the crisis. Functional roles, as opposed to personal names or titles, should be clearly defined in the plan. The use of checklists and sample documents should be used liberally to ease tasks and provide guidance during the response.



Once the crisis response plan is written and approved, employees should be oriented and trained on its execution. While employees’ roles may differ during a crisis, all participants should be trained on the mechanics of the plan.

After the plan has been distributed and employees have been trained, the plan should be tested, which is the next step in the cycle. “Exercising” the plan can take several forms.

At one end of the spectrum is a table top drill. Participants are presented with a simulated crisis (preferably with a graphic representation) involving a company asset and respond using the organization established in crisis response plan. Such drills are designed to “stay in the room” and promote a common understanding of the elements and teamwork necessary for a coordinated response.

At the other end of the spectrum is the full mock emergency exercise. Like the table top drill, participants use their crisis response plan during a simulated emergency. However, mock exercises should ideally evaluate both the strategic and tactical perspectives. They should be designed to help company’s test commu-

nications among functional areas, to evaluate the effectiveness of coordination between the crisis response plan and tactical response procedures, to test the ability of the company to respond to simulated inquiries from the media and public, as well as the interaction with local emergency responders.

Regardless of the level of complexity of a table top drill or full field mock emergency drill, the company should fervently document all aspects of its response to the simulated emergency so it can learn from the exercise.

Once the data from the exercise has been collected and analyzed, the company should use the information to update and improve its crisis response program. In far too many cases, elaborate drills are conducted and the lessons that are learned are never applied.

A critical component of the overall crisis response program is adoption of an emergency management structure such as the Incident Command System (ICS). This was developed in the mid 1970s in response to several major wildfires that occurred in California. Since that time, the ICS has become the national standard among emergency response agencies.

It is very important for pipeline operations personnel that may respond to a crisis to understand how the ICS process works and how their roles dovetail into the established public sector ICS that will be established at the scene. In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, the National Incident Management System (NIMS) was born. The NIMS builds on ICS and establishes a framework for crisis management regardless of scale of the emergency. Local, state, and federal response entities are required to adopt and implement NIMS.

No discussion concerning crisis response would be complete without addressing the need to be prepared to respond to inquiries from the media and the public. In today’s environment of instantaneous news, pipeline operators don’t have the luxury of delaying or ignoring requests from the media. Put simply, if a company chooses not to, or is slow in its response to media requests, the media will get its story from other less reliable source.

Proactive companies have employees trained as company spokespersons or at least on how to appropriately hand off the media to trained personnel. Remember that the media is the conduit to the public. Interfacing with



the media is your opportunity to tell the public about what you are doing to respond to the crisis and to put the company in the best light possible. Crisis media response should be an integral component of any table top drill, mock emergency exercise, or comprehensive crisis training regimen.

Despite best efforts, emergency incidents will happen. Those companies that develop comprehensive crisis response plans and exercise them are in the best position to anticipate a successful outcome. If your company faced a crisis today, would your employees know how to react? Do they know how to handle inquiries from the media and work with local emergency responders within the Incident Command System? **P&GJ**

Author: Glen Boatwright has 13 years experience in the natural gas industry in the compliance and emergency management arena. Prior to joining the industry, Glen served as an emergency manager, firefighter, and hazmat officer. Glen has particular expertise as a trainer on emergency management, particularly in the Incident Command Structure. Over the past several years, he has been active in promoting emergency planning and management in the natural gas industry.