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WHO SHOULD "OWN" EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT IN YOUR BUSINESS?

In the local, state, and federal government Emergency Management (EM) is a discipline that, if not always given the resources needed, is at least recognized as an essential piece of the preparedness puzzle. For the most part though, EM in the private sector is still given little thought or is even unheard of. Who owns EM in the private sector now? Nobody and Everybody!

Emergency Management in the private sector is still an emerging field. Most businesses don't have an Emergency Manager, much less an Emergency Management department. Instead, they farm the role and responsibilities out to whichever department or individual seems to be (in someone's mind) the closest fit. Or, worse, they simply ignore EM as a distinct discipline and assume that EM needs are being met by other departments and regulatory compliance efforts.

Of all the departments to which Emergency Management duties are usually assigned, the Safety Department seems to be the most likely recipient. All too often it is wrongly assumed that just because one of the regulatory requirements of OSHA is for an Emergency Action Plan, then the Safety Department is already handling Emergency Management. In today's business environment of doing more with less it is difficult enough for a Safety Manager to sell management on all the safety needs of the business, much less convince management that EM is outside his or her realm of expertise. There are elements within EM that a good safety professional can and should be consulted on, but they are two distinct fields.

Security is another likely department to be assigned Emergency Management duties. Again, faulty logic is used by a management team uneducated in the needs and requirements of EM. Because Security is usually part (or all) of the emergency response force for the business and it is assumed that emergency response and emergency management are one and the same, a Security officer is assumed to be the logical candidate to be responsible for Emergency Management. An equivalent argument would be that a sales person on the floor is equivalent to the Director of Business Development. One is reactive, the other proactive; one is operational, the other managerial. But, whatever you do, don't leave the Security Department out of your EM process! The expertise within a solid Security Department will be invaluable in helping with such elements of EM as the HVA and incident response planning.

Without a clear cut definition of who should really own Emergency Management, management may see the key word "Mitigation" and assign the responsibilities to Risk Management in the mistaken understanding that anything Mitigation falls under Risk Management. While a business's Risk Management experts should definitely be consulted on the identification and mitigation of hazards, the additional EM aspects of Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery shouldn't necessarily fall to them. Again, don't fall into the trap of failing to take advantage of the expertise within the Risk Management department when working on EM plans and procedures. The wealth of expertise available within Risk Management is a source to be utilized, even if Risk Management isn't the appropriate owner of EM.

Yet another department to which Emergency Management responsibilities are sometimes assigned is the IT/IS Department. Business Continuity originated in the IT/IS world and for many hospitals it has never evolved beyond backing up their electronic data on a regular basis. When EM is presented as a need, management equates EM to Business Continuity. It is then up to the Business Continuity expert to educate management on the fact that Business Continuity should really be one aspect of a complete EM program, not the entire program.

So, who should own Emergency Management? The best solution would be to create and support an EM department. However, we all know that small businesses and even most large ones aren't

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financially capable of just creating a whole new department for every need that comes down the line. EM in the private sector is a discipline that requires a strong champion on the leadership team. So, the answer to our question is; there is no single answer. The department with the leader most committed to ensuring the ultimate survival of the business is the best candidate for owning EM. That could be the Safety Department, Security Department, Risk Management, or a totally unrelated department. Until EM grows into a discipline equivalent to the size of OSHA or other regulatory compliance fields it will remain, at best, a single position assigned to a marginally related department.

I'm not saying that the above departments are incapable of "owning" Emergency Management for a business; only that they should never be assigned EM responsibilities without an accompanying EM expert to execute those responsibilities. To expect a department to take on a role with which the department leadership and team members are unfamiliar and uneducated and expect success is simply asking for failure. There may be team members within a department who have an interest in EM and who are willing to take on the role and go through the learning process to educate themselves in EM, but the learning process takes time. Until that person has been educated and, maybe more importantly, managed some real-life emergencies he or she isn't really the expert we need them to be. So, rather than retraining a current employee, businesses must consider creating an EM position and assigning that position to a parent department.

One common argument against creating and filling an Emergency Management position is the cost. It is quite often viewed as the expense of an additional full-time position that simply costs money and doesn't generate revenue. But, if we take the cost associated with pulling an employee already established in their current position and providing the amount of education required to effect a career change, plus the amount of time required to earn some real-life experience, we are much better served financially to simply create a new EM position and advertise for and hire a person with the level of expertise we require. Colleges and universities are building EM programs that are turning out high quality candidates for both entry level and advanced level EM positions. There are also credentialing programs, such as the International Association of Emergency Managers' accredited credentialing program that validates the experience, education, training and professional contributions of potential candidates. A good Emergency Management Professional, just like a good Safety or Security Professional, will save more than enough money in the long run to pay for the position. It has to be viewed as an investment in the health of the business.

The threat of incidents and disasters, both natural and man-made, continues to swell. Emergency Management is no longer an option for businesses who wish to survive after the water recedes, the fire is extinguished, or the mob disperses. Businesses, small and large, need to embrace EM with the realization that survival is based upon being prepared for the worst, while hoping for the best.

Copyright 2007 - 2009, James Payne. About the author: James Payne is a Charlotte, NC-based Emergency Management and Safety consultant with over fifteen years experience.

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