

Company Responders – A Coordinated Response To Emergencies

By Regina Phelps

How does your company respond to an internal emergency? Who responds to the incident? What is the role of the team or the individuals? How do different groups or departments organize the effort? In many companies, the response to an emergency involves a combination of two or more departments, but there are rarely written plans or processes that coordinate the response. The goal of this article is to build the case to support the development of the "Company Responder Team" concept in your organization.

Company Responder Team Members

A "Company Responder Team" is a cross-functional team comprised of individuals from four different employee groups or departments: Facilities, Security, Reception, and Floor Wardens or Employee Emergency Response Teams (EERT). These groups are often immediately brought into an event. They need to coordinate their activities, and they depend on each other for information and support. The goal of a Company Responder program is to formally recognize this effort, and establish coordinated plans and training for their effective response.

What Does Everyone Do?

Security

As might be expected, Security is a primary first responder, and often serves as a hub of emergency response activity and communication within a company. With an obvious emphasis on issues related to protection, such as managing physical security and visitor entry, this group also coordinates with local law enforcement and, if the need arises, with Federal responders such as the FBI or ATF (Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms). Often, Security is also tasked with providing medical response and support (such as first aid and/or AED responder) as well. If this group has a 24x7 Security Operations Center (SOC), it will likely provide a 24-hour emergency contact number for multiple locations, and may also serve as a dispatch service for the local facility.

Facilities

Facilities is also a primary first responder for the company. They are usually the first point of contact for building-specific issues. Their emergency role is to respond to a building emergency, and they usually coordinate with local emergency responders, particularly the Fire Department, Search and Rescue, and Hazardous Material Teams. This department will often be responsible for the development of emergency procedures, the maintenance of emergency response equipment (such as life safety and fire suppression systems), training for Floor Wardens or EERTs, and fire drills for the building.

Reception

The Reception Team may not be thought of as a company responder but they often provide a key role as a central hub for communication. Many companies use the receptionist's line as the primary number to call in emergencies, or the reception area as a central meeting or reporting location following an incident. Because of this "central hub" role, it is critical that they be part of the Company Responder Team. In addition, because many companies depend on "grapevine communication," they may have access to more and better information than you may know. They are also often the first official company person who greets local fire or police responders.

Floor Wardens or Employee Emergency Response Teams (EERT)

Trained employees are a great asset on a Company Responder Team. Floor Wardens or Employee Emergency Response Teams (EERT) usually assist with building evacuations and may also be trained to provide volunteer medical assistance as well. A rule of thumb for a reasonable number of EERT members is approximately 10% of the employee population. (Employee distribution on floors and shift workers may require some adjustment to this percentage.) Floor wardens are often the eyes and ears of the program in the work areas – after all, that's where they are located!

Company Responder Plans

In the ideal world, each group in the Company Responder Team has their own written emergency procedures, and these procedures would be all integrated together. The types of procedures you should have in place depends on the risks you are likely to face in your area. Conduct a hazard risk assessment for your area, and then be sure that you have written procedures for the most likely emergencies in your area. This list may include procedures for some of the following events:

Natural Hazards

- Earthquake
- Tsunami/Tidal waves
- Volcanic eruptions

Weather

- Flooding
- Hurricane/Typhoon
- Tornado/Cyclone
- Severe winter weather

Human

- Medical emergencies
- Bomb threats
- Security issues
- Workplace violence
- Hazardous material release
- Contagious disease (such as pandemic influenza)

Develop and Integrate the Procedures

Once you inventory the emergency procedures for your location and each group, you may need to write new procedures to ensure that each group has the appropriate written responses. Once all procedures are developed, it is now critical to ensure that all of them are integrated together to ensure a seamless response.

Emergency procedures can be designed to stand alone or to be integrated into the total program. Ideally, you should be able to look at each teams' procedures and see their role along with the roles of the other teams in the same document. If you choose an integrated approach, highlight each team's role through the use of different color type or different fonts so that the eye can quickly see who is who and who is doing what.

Training

One key aspect of the Company Responder program is training. (The other aspect is exercises, which will be covered in the next section.) If your company provides training currently to these groups, it is likely done in a silo. An ideal training program will include both individual and team training to achieve the best results.

Training Schedules

A model training program will take a two-pronged approach: train the individual departments, then combine the Facilities, Security, and Reception teams together for one team training. (Floor Wardens or the EERT often have their own training program, and train with the Company Responder Team through actual field response activities such as fire drills.) It is wise to develop an annual training schedule that shows all training courses, the team requirements, and the actual training dates.

Training Courses

A likely set of training topics are shown below, listed by each group:

Security

- Physical security procedures
- Incident Command System (ICS)
- CPR/AED
- First aid
- Bloodborne pathogens

Facilities

- Internal life safety procedures
- Fire Life Safety Director Certificate
- Incident Command System (ICS)
- CPR/AED
- First aid
- Bloodborne pathogens

Floor Wardens / EERT

- EERT procedures
- Fire drill protocol
- CPR/AED
- First aid
- Bloodborne pathogens

Reception

- Internal reception procedures
- Communication in an emergency
- Dealing with difficult people
- Radio training

Exercises

The other key aspect of this program is exercises. Once the team has been trained, you can begin to develop them further through the use of exercises. Adults learn best by doing, not by listening. The power of an exercise is that team members learn their role in their intellect, their body, and "in their bones," if you will. "Learning by doing" leads to better retention and a more effective team. There are five basic types of emergency exercises; each one plays a role in team development.

Orientation

Uses a simple narrative and delivered in a PowerPoint slide format in a conversational, non-threatening manner. It is often used to orient a team to a plan or a plan to a team.

Drill

Supervised field response activity with a limited focus to test a particular procedure. Drills usually highlight and closely examine a limited portion of the overall emergency management plan.

Tabletop, Basic and Advanced

Basic tabletop – Uses written and verbal scenarios to evaluate the effectiveness of an organization's emergency management plan and procedures, and to highlight issues of coordination and assignment of responsibilities. Tabletop exercises do not physically simulate specific events, do not utilize equipment, and do not deploy resources.

Advanced tabletop – Same as a Basic tabletop, with the addition of a Simulation Team present in the exercise room.

Functional

Simulates a disaster in the most realistic manner possible without moving real people or equipment to a real site. A Functional exercise utilizes a carefully designed and scripted scenario, with timed messages and communications between players and simulators.

Full-Scale

Tests the mobilization of all or as many as possible of the response components, takes place in "real time," employs real equipment, and tests several emergency functions.¹

Beginning An Exercise Program

Start initially with an Orientation exercise. Develop a straightforward narrative from your risk portfolio, and then walk the team through the narrative. Prepare some questions that require them to reference their plan, which allows them to "learn it again." Sample questions may include: "Based on this situation, what would be your first response?" "How does your team come together to assess the problem?" "Where do you meet, who is in charge, and who communicates with who?"

Next, move your team into Tabletop exercises, which continue to challenge and mature the learner. Progress to a Functional exercise, which is more realistic, requiring the teams to do everything they would normally do to solve the situation (albeit in a conference room). Finally, coordinate a Full-Scale exercise, which ties it all together: a realistic experience, and the requirement that the team actually perform the skills in the "outside world."

One Final Word

The best program in the world requires one critical thing to remain vital and current – maintenance. You must maintain your procedures, your plans, and your training and exercise program. The bad news is that you're never done. This is an ongoing activity. But the good news is that the rewards are great! With this type of program you get a company team that can respond to the likely emergencies in your area with an effective, clear, and coordinated response. Think about it – what else would you want?

About the Author

Regina Phelps is an internationally recognized expert in the field of emergency management and contingency planning, and is the founder of Emergency Management & Safety Solutions. Since 1982, she has provided consultation and speaking services to clients in four continents. Ms. Phelps is the author of *Emergency Management Exercises: From Response to Recovery – Everything you need to know to design a great exercise*; just released from Chandi Media. She can be reached at regina@ems-solutionsinc.com or www.ems-solutionsinc.com.

¹Emergency Management Exercises: From Response to Recovery – Everything you need to know to design a great exercise, Regina Phelps, Chandi Media, September 2010.