



SAFETY LEADERSHIP

Safety and Performance Excellence: Lessons from Harvey

Category 4 doesn't sink in until you see winds above 130 mph, and widespread flooding is just a concept until the sky dumps 50 inches of water on an area the size of Lake Michigan.

Terry L. Mathis | Oct 12, 2017

Living on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico always has been both a blessing and a challenge. Hurricane Harvey definitely was on the challenging side. When neighborhoods flood, it is amazing to witness the variety of humankind that comes

wading and swimming out. It equally is amazing to see who comes to the rescue when lives are at stake.

I could not help making comparisons between this natural disaster and the practice of safety in the workplace. Below are some of my observations.

When bad events are too far apart, people tend to lose their sense of vulnerability. It only has been nine years since the last hurricane here in the Houston area, but since that time, more houses were constructed in low-lying areas and along the coast. Memories of the last event were growing dim and new residents had moved in who were not here during the previous storm. Everyone knows bad things can happen, but they usually don't; so, why worry?

In industry, going a long time between events can have the same effect. Workers begin to forget to take those little steps to keep them safe, and there is an unspoken attitude that everything is alright and everyone is safe. When organizations measure and communicate how long it has been since the last event, it can reinforce the perception that safety is going great. This is why storms and accidents often shock us: not just because they are bad, but because they are relatively unexpected.

Too many people fail to anticipate and prepare. Due to the loss of the sense of vulnerability and the demands of more timely issues, people failed to prepare for Harvey. Very few evacuees had an escape pack or even their important papers in the same place. People along the coast failed to identify their best escape route and alternates. There was a last-minute run on stores, indicating people did not stock up at the beginning of the hurricane season on basic foods, water or batteries. Television stations reported a record low number of people requested their hurricane-survival guides this year even though they also were offered as a very convenient online app.

Many industries have disaster plans and drills, but have a less-planned response to accidents. Any number of companies have been ambushed by their own lack of preparedness when workers get injured in non-traditional ways. Many industries

have not played devil's advocate and explored all the ways workers could get injured and what emergency services are available in those unusual cases. In one case, a worker fell into a pond on company property and hit his head. The medivac helicopter would not let him on board without an MSDS for the pond water.

People are skeptical of official warnings. After some past disasters, leaders tend to be overly cautious. Residents have learned this and often take a wait-and-see attitude. Mandatory evacuations have been unnecessary in the past, so people are more inclined to ignore them. Weather forecasts can be less-than-accurate, resulting in people waiting longer to respond to them.

In industry, warnings often either are reports of recent accidents or risks assessments of upcoming work. Neither of these sends a strong signal of danger and often fail to create the desired focus on risks and precautions. They can become routine and repetitive, and disappear into the more demanding issues of production and daily activity.

There is no standard response! Different people react differently. One would think anyone sitting on top of their house with waters rising around them gladly would take a ride to a shelter on a rescue boat. Not so! Many refused and had to be rescued by Coast Guard helicopters, some from rushing waters that swept them off their roofs. A few people in mandatory evacuation areas held parties instead of leaving. Almost every recent hurricane resulted in more fatalities from people driving into standing water than from storm surge or wind damage.

Safety professionals and organizational leaders often project how workers will respond to safety requirements or dangerous situations and workers regularly surprise them. Unless people are trained or conditioned on how to respond, they will not uniformly react to the same stimuli. Even when risks accurately are identified and warnings are given, workers may react in seemingly irrational ways. There almost always are factors impacting those decisions that did not get discovered in an accident investigation. If they had, they would have provided a deeper insight into why the individual made the choice he or she did.

People tend to pull together when the stakes are high. When the official call for civilian help went out in Houston, people from the entire region answered that call. They brought boats and tall vehicles from a multi-state area to rescue stranded families. Then they went back to collect the pets. Shelters asked for supplies and volunteers, then had to ask people to stay home because the shelters were overstocked and manned. The response was overwhelming. J.J. Watt of the Houston Texans asked for contributions to help those affected, and set an initial goal of half a million dollars. The final total is over \$37 million from more than 209,000 donations.

When workers have been killed or seriously disabled on the job, their fellow workers often have come to their aid or the aid of their families. Collections are taken and fundraising events are held. Local news tells their stories and asks the community to help.

Accidents at work are their own kind of disaster, and we react to them in much in the same way we react to threats from natural causes. We tend to get busy with our lives and work, and respond slowly or poorly to the early warning signs. We also tend to bicker over small things but come together when big things threaten us, and it really counts. EHS

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