

Emergency Preparedness—Is Your Business Ready?

By Mark R. Lupo

Blackouts, brownouts, tornados, hurricanes, ice storms, terrorist incidents... Each of these events can have a devastating effect on the way in which we live our lives and for the continuity of your business. Though preparation will not eliminate the stress or potential for injury or death, it can help mitigate the effects. And being prepared means having a plan, in this case an emergency plan.

An emergency plan will guide you and your staff on how best to handle the challenges of an unexpected threat to you, your staff, your business, and your customers. The plan can be thought of as existing in two phases: The tactical or immediate threat plan and the continuity plan.

The goal in the tactical period is to minimize injury and death to you, your staff and your customers. The type of emergency one is facing will determine whether one is to evacuate the building (in cases of fire, bomb threats, hostile/aggressive person entering your business, etc.) or whether you will need to shelter in place (in case of tornado, other severe weather, certain types of terrorist incidents, etc.). In order to minimize injury, your goal as a business owner is to remove yourself and anyone in harm's way to a safe location, a rally point. At the rally point, a role call can be taken to identify who is present and who is missing. At the same time, individuals that are not present in the office (say are out making sales calls) must be notified, if possible, and alerted to what is going on in the office. A plan needs to be developed for each of these scenarios, it needs to be written, a copy needs to be available to each of your staff, and the plan needs to be practiced.

Once the immediate threat has passed, one must have a plan to assist in the recovery phase and to ensure that critical data, necessary for rebuilding your business, has been saved. The goal in the continuity

phase is to minimize downtime in the event of a human or natural caused disaster as well as to provide a recovery strategy, including a repository of important recovery information. In developing the continuity plan, one begins by focusing on collecting information that will assist in recovery: i.e. employee contact, vendor and supplier information, and key contacts/customer information. Consider setting up alternative suppliers for those key items necessary to keep your business running. Plan to establish a recovery location in the case your present business site is no longer able to be used. If possible, identify a site outside the local power grid, which would be accessible in the case of major wind damage. Make a record of those items and personnel necessary to get your recovery site up and going. The quicker and more efficiently you are able to get your business operational, the better able you will be to satisfy your customers' needs during a very difficult time.

One should consider that, upon a catastrophic event occurring, the first thought that you and your staff will have is probably related to the safety of your families. A significant reduction in staff should be anticipated in the early period after the event. Plan for that reduction in staff. Your business will only take a priority once your family and your staff's families' safety has been achieved.

To prepare for this eventuality, you can begin by encouraging your staff to develop their own, personal emergency plan. You must lead the way in your organization by developing your own plan: Building an emergency kit for your family, developing a communication plan, and staying informed. The more certain you feel that your family is ready to handle an emergency, the better able you will be to focus on leading those around you and assisting your business in getting back up and running.

Developing an emergency plan should be considered a critical element in the operation of your business. Though not something you will use everyday, the plan is something that needs to be practiced... and practiced. Developing a personal emergency plan for yourself and your family is the first priority. As a leader, communicate the importance of a personal emergency plan to your

staff and help them build their own emergency kits. Begin developing your business emergency plan, both for the immediate threat and for the long term, continuity phase. When the time comes, you and your staff need to respond immediately, without having to think of what to do. Be sure to make emergency preparedness a priority in your business. For additional information, please go to www.ready.gov/ or contact your local SBDC consultant.



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