

*Stepping Up to the Plate: Developing a Positive Incident
Review Process*

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Stepping Up to the Plate: Developing a Positive Incident Review Process

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Your company or agency has just experienced an emergency situation. This could have been a significant event, such as a natural disaster, terrorism threat or a fire. Even, it may have been a localized workplace violence incident or safety accident. The response was based on your current Emergency Response or Security Plans, recovery from the emergency situation was based on your Business Continuity Plans or other procedures, the media's requests were managed as per your organizations Crisis Communication Plan. When the dust clears and normal operations return, you ask yourself "*I wonder how we really did?*"

Many companies and agencies ask themselves this question after an emergency situation and some do something about it by performing an incident review or post emergency review. Regardless of what you call it, I find that although an incident review process is performed by many, few perform it well. How these reviews are performed and what you do with the information you gather is critical to your company's success and resilience when the next emergency develops. Let's examine what people involved in leading the post incident review should consider when designing and completing it.

A question I am often asked is "*Why go through the effort? We did OK.*" If you don't, you will fall prey to the same problems and issues that plagued you during your last incident. The only way to truly go down the road of continuous improvement is by learning from your mistakes and taking action to enhance your internal procedures or processes. I have found that over one-third of all issues raised from a company's incident review are procedure or process related, one-third are communication related issues while the last third are miscellaneous in nature. The post emergency review is a safe atmosphere to discuss issues and arrive at action items or recommendations for improvement. A thorough and disciplined incident review process will drive better results to build more resilient processes going forward.

Culture is Key

Employees must feel comfortable about talking openly and honestly regarding what happened during an emergency situation. The discussion must focus only on the facts and not on personalities.

Determining the root cause of the incident is important, but arriving at valuable recommendations for possible improvement is the main objective. In order for employees to "Step Up To The Plate", they must feel they are in a safe environment and have trust in your company's intention that what may be broken will be fixed as part of your continuous improvement process. If you build a credible incident review process, credible results will follow. Remember this is not a finger pointing exercise, focusing on finding fault may force compliance, but it will not build a continuous improvement culture. Develop a documented process to follow up on any recommendations and determine if they can be implemented. While a new idea may sound valid during the discussion phase, it may later be determined that it cannot be implemented for engineering or practical reasons. Thus always document these recommendations so that they must be reviewed by your internal subject matter experts to determine if the recommendation can be implemented. "*Say what you will do, then do what you say.*"

Lastly, one of the most key aspects of an incident review is protecting the information you receive from the post emergency review. Some organizations differentiate between an incident review and an incident investigation. The incident investigation process would be utilized after a more severe issue where the findings may want to be legally reviewed before they must be shared. Sometimes the circumstances of an incident could involve proprietary processes of an internal procedure or involve sensitive personal details (i.e., following a workplace violence incident). Some of the gaps identified or recommendations made following the incident could be potentially embarrassing to an organization or agency if leaked externally. These details can be protected, if it is not negligent to do so, by circulating them only to those who have responsibility for the issue. Ensure policies are in place to ensure employees do not prematurely share the information externally. If legal issues are a risk and the findings need to be protected under solicitor/client privilege, follow your organization's process to involve legal services.

If potential company policy culpability issues surface by an employee or by the organization, it is best to set those issues aside to be reviewed later by a smaller team staffed by internal subject matter experts. Those pointed discussions will be held behind closed doors and the documented results of those discussions will be shared on a “need to know” basis. If the series of events prove to be of a serious nature, then external regulatory or even police services may have to be brought in. The incident as a whole can and should still be reviewed to determine if improvements can be made to the organization's response, repair or recovery processes.

Imagine the facilitation of your internal incident review process much like playing baseball. If you are asking your employees to step up to the plate, then there should be rules to the game and steps along the way to achieve winning results.

1st Inning

Develop your incident review criteria and document the review process guidelines to follow as these will become the rules of the game. The guidelines around the threshold of when an incident would require an incident review should be laid out. Consider examples, such as critical injuries, severe customer impacts, identified procedure, process or training gaps, etc. Develop criteria as to who is responsible for organizing the review meeting, who should attend, who will take minutes and, most importantly, establish your rules around who is to follow up on any recommendations or action items recognized. Identify who will facilitate the discussion. I recommend a facilitator who is well respected in your organization and has the ability to separate any internal departmental bias. Alternatively, bring in an external subject matter expert who can either facilitate or assist in the process.

2nd Inning

As soon as possible after the incident, gather your documentation. Time heals all wounds, but it also causes memories to fade. Pull your information from the Incident Commanders notes, call or dispatch logs, and incident event logs from your Emergency Operating Center (EOC). Use copies of maps or even engineering drawings if they pertain to the incident. Also, gather copies of your internal procedures or processes that apply to the circumstances you will be reviewing.

3rd Inning

Armed with information, build a timeline of the incident. Document when the emergency started, then identify major decision points or significant events that occurred through to the end of the incident. This is important as this becomes your batting order as you walk through the incident. Whoever is going to lead the meeting should review this information in detail prior to the incident review. You may think this is understood, but it is imperative that everyone in attendance understands the circumstances of the event and the flow of the incident.

4th Inning

Have all interested parties attend the meeting. Missing one key group means you could lose valuable input. In these meetings, a person's role in the emergency situation should not matter – management/ non-management, unionized/ non-unionized employees or contractors. If they had a key role in the original incident, they should have a voice. Like other issues, this is a balance. Try to keep the number of attendees

manageable. Too few and you may be missing some key players, too many and the meeting may grow out of control.

5th Inning

Set your incident review date as soon as possible after the actual incident. This is going to be one of the most difficult activities. With the hectic schedules and workload your organization is experiencing, this will not be easy. Two weeks after is ideal, but not always possible. Two months after may be easier to organize, but memories fade and other priorities may come into play.

6th Inning

Logistics are important. Find a location for the meeting that is large enough to comfortably hold everyone. If attendees are comfortable, they will feel more like contributing to the discussion. Schedule breaks when appropriate, this is not designed to be an endurance run. Set an appropriate time to complete the review. You will need to get through the details, but you also do not want some discussions to drag on. End the meeting when you committed to end it. If further discussion is required, then schedule another meeting rather than force everyone to sit through a discussion that may not concern them.

7th Inning

Walk through the incident details, don't run. Rushing through a critical incident review may cause you to miss important details or recommendations. People need to feel they are being heard and their opinions matter. People remember close to 90% of what they experience as opposed to only 10% of what others tell them. People speak more transparently after triumphing over difficult situations and are more comfortable in sharing their experiences.

8th Inning

Ask questions... *"If the same incident occurred today, what would you do differently?"* After been involved in hundreds of emergency situations, I have found that there is always something you would do differently.

9th Inning

Document your results. If possible, having a person designated as the scribe will make sure the recommendations or action items were properly captured. A person in a support role who was more removed from the emergency situation works best. This also allows the person leading the review to focus on the discussions being held and manage the meeting to conclusion. Be sure to identify who owns the takeaways and establish what a reasonable timeline would be to review and complete each item. This will demonstrate that the organization is serious about

saying what they will do and doing what they say. If you utilize root cause analysis software, such as TapRoot or other models, these details are a must to determine the root cause of the incident.

Post-Game Analysis

When the Post Incident Review is complete be sure to circulate the results to the stakeholders and meeting attendees. They need to see the results of their effort and ensure the correct context of the recommendations put forward. Once approved, this document serves as a reminder to follow up on any takeaways they may have. When developing your incident review process, identify how often the review process owner is required to circle back with the recommendation owners to verify their status. If it was important enough to talk about and document as a take away, it is important enough to ensure it was completed. Verification once each quarter is a good guideline as it gives everyone time to complete the recommendation which may require some resources or financial commitment in a particular business quarter. Follow-up also builds credibility with senior management and your employees in your process. You should also consider categorizing your recommendations and/or root causes by type. For example, recommendation categories could involve training issues, procedural gaps, safety recommendations, and/or even change management issues, etc. This gives you the option of performing quarterly or year-end analysis from your reviews by category. This data can be very helpful in focusing only on what is broken and identifying the solutions

quickly. Analysis from the facts you gathered can remove any personal agenda issues plus saves time and minimizes wasted energy. By building a resilient incident review process you will now be able to measure over time how effective your emergency response or business continuity plans are instead of just wondering. It will also demonstrate the strengths in your processes, as well as areas for improvement. If managed properly and consistently, building a resilient incident review process will become a valuable tool to demonstrate continuous improvement in your organization.

Go ahead, step up to the plate...you're up.

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About the Author