



Crisis Management:

How Aircraft Accidents Can Help Refine Your Emergency Operations Plan

In responding to numerous critical incidents and mass casualty events over the past 20 years, we have observed one unwavering constant, irrespective of the type of crisis. In the immediate aftermath, what people most want and need is information. If there is even the remote possibility of knowing someone who may be affected, the incident that has been quickly tweeted about, posted to Facebook and publicized via traditional media becomes personal. Was my daughter on board the aircraft? Has my spouse been injured or killed as a result of an explosion or episode of mass violence at work? These concerns will create a flood of inquiries.

Many organizations are not fully prepared for the volume of inquiries and often fail to plan for how information will be obtained, vetted and provided to those involved. Family members expect the organization to provide timely and accurate answers, particularly for their most critical question: *“Is my loved one OK?”* When thousands posed this question to the employers occupying the World Trade Center

Towers on Sept. 11, 2001, most did not have the means to respond to these inquiries.

An examination of aviation accidents offers valuable insights that apply to almost any type of disaster. After a series of U.S. aircraft accidents in the 1990s, affected family groups clamored for reform in how airlines respond to survivors, their families, and victim families post-accident. Their testimony during a series of congressional hearings in the summer of 1996 revealed a consistent and troubling theme – the airlines were unable or unwilling to provide timely, accurate information about their loved ones. As a result, these families perceived the airlines did not care and the human impact of the tragedy was downplayed.

In response, the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act was enacted in October of 1996. Specifically, the law requires airlines to develop and implement a plan, with many of the mandated tasks related to the provision of information. Requirements include establishing a reliable, publicized toll-free number with sufficient telephone capacity to respond to the inquiries, providing timely notifications to families, and offering logistical support to passengers and families in the aftermath of an accident. Information about the accident and its victims is provided by the National Transportation Safety board and the applicable local medical examiner or coroner, respectively.

Best Practices from Lessons Learned

While businesses and organizations outside of commercial aviation and passenger rail are not required to develop and implement plans of this kind, in the event of a disaster, employees and their families will have the same informational needs and similar expectations of the organization. Should a crisis occur at a workplace, the inability to provide information will adversely affect an organization's credibility with its workforce, as well as its reputation with customers and the general public.

Without preparation, it will be extremely challenging to answer the central question posed by hundreds or thousands of family members: *"Is my loved one OK?"* Based on lessons learned from aviation disaster planning, we recommend the following be developed and integrated within your organization's emergency operations plan (EOP):

Component 1: Test Shelter-In-Place and Evacuation

Include a plan for testing shelter-in-place and evacuation processes, including a reliable means to account for every employee on-premise at the time of an event. This information will also be invaluable for first responders involved in the search and rescue effort.

Component 2: Plan for Mass Call Volume

Develop a process for responding to the inevitable volume of inquiries. Landlines and cellular telecommunications may be disrupted. Frantic friends and family members will not be able to reach employees and vice versa.

Component 3: Drill Down on Internal Communication Processes

Create a procedure for maintaining direct communication between an organization's emergency response team and incident command at the scene. This is necessary to confirm information about injured persons transported to local hospitals.

Component 4: Coordinate with Local Agencies

Pre-establish coordination with the local chapter of the Red Cross, which, in mass casualty events, is allowed to obtain victim information from hospitals (typically, this would be prohibited due to confidentiality regulations).

Component 5: Plan for Needing to Establish a Family Assistance Center

Pre-consider strategies for establishing a family assistance center, typically at a hotel, where victim families can gather to obtain information and receive emotional support and psychological first aid. Families also have an opportunity to obtain information from responding authorities.

Anticipating the need for information is a critical aspect of being prepared. It is essential that organizations be ready to address the expectations of families, employees, customers and the public for timely information and support in the aftermath of a workplace disaster.

Black Swan Solutions assists organizations in preparing for, responding to and recovering from the human impact of crises. Our turnkey approach integrates the expertise of experienced, masters-prepared professionals with state of the art technology. We mitigate organizational risk by ensuring that people get timely and accurate information, as well as the human support they need during and after a crisis. In responding to crises ranging from data breaches to mass casualty events, our client organizations, among the most recognized brands in the world, rapidly communicate with stakeholders, demonstrate compassion for victims, and protect their reputation. For more information, visit www.blackswancrisissolutions.com.