Apollo Associated Services, LLC
Root Cause Analysis
2501 Washington St, 2nd Floor
Midland, MI 48642
PH: (989) 835-3402
www.apollorca.com

Improve response to major incidents with better preparedness and training

By Mike Resimius and John Stiller

A version of this article was featured in the March issue of Professional Safety magazine.

When a major safety event takes place at one of your company's facilities, what do you do? How do you manage the immediate issues – avoid more danger, handle employee fear, manage circling news trucks or helicopters, and the like?

We often hear stories of engineers, supervisors and safety folks attacking the scene like a herd of elephants in a china shop. Others recount that one safety professional is sent out to do everything, which can feel like herding cats – including cats that don't accept the safety professional's authority.

Site managers and their staffs often are hesitant to call in someone from corporate because they like to maintain control of their own site and would rather handle the situation privately -- without judgment or imposition of corporate culture and opinion.

In short, it can be total chaos without a thorough plan and adequate preparation.

The heat of the moment is not the best time to decide what needs to be done and who's going to assume each role. In some cases, organizations have thought about that ahead of time, so they create and document protocols and procedures. But is that enough to enable people to be totally prepared? Many organizations don't know until the major incident happens.

How do you set up a system so that everyone really knows what response will look like, and what their roles/responsibilities will be? Plant personnel are responding with a goal to recover from the incident, so someone else needs to be prepared to respond with a mission to find the causes and solutions.

By designating, training and preparing employees ahead of time, and continuously practicing and refreshing training, organizations are most well-equipped to effectively respond to safety events…and help prevent them from recurring in the future.

The following are best practices for setting up such a system.

<u>Assembling the team</u>

It works well to assemble an investigation team and a root cause analysis team that will perform separate functions, but collaborate and integrate. The investigation team should be comprised of people with specific training and experience conducting investigations. Depending on the size of the organization and the geography of its sites, investigators may reside on site, or travel from a corporate site to the scene (as long as they can get there in just a few hours).

It is also important to think carefully about how many people should be involved in the investigation team. When you consider the volume of activity that must take place in a short amount of time – especially because it is essential to preserve and capture evidence while it is fresh – it is important to make sure that there are enough people assigned to immediate response. Responsibilities should be divided based on skill sets, as well as investigation training and experience. This can make the difference between success and failure by a variety of measures.

The investigation team focuses on collecting evidence, then turns the findings over to a root cause analysis team to review and analyze. The root cause analysis team would ideally include people with subject-matter expertise that relates to the incident, so they are able to effectively analyze the evidence. After the initial analysis, the RCA team may have questions or requests for additional information, which can be funneled back to the investigation team for collection. The investigation team can be right-sized to the need – larger in the immediate aftermath, then smaller as time passes, but still on-the-ready to handle follow-up needs.

When an incident involves personnel or equipment from a contractor, there are special considerations that must be taken into account and prepared for ahead of time. This is a precaution that many companies don't take, and it usually comes back to bite them. Your contractor should be aware of your process, and you should communicate ahead of time about how they will integrate into the process in the event of a major incident.

Preparation and training

Once you know exactly what the roles and responsibilities are, you can outline a specific training and skill-building plan for each team member. This plan should be revisited regularly to ensure that it does not fall to the bottom of the priority list compared to responsibilities that are pressing on a more daily basis.

The team leaders also should work with the plants/sites to orient them on what to expect in the event of a major incident and what roles they will play at the plant/site level.

Confidentiality

As a point of order, it is wise to ask everyone designated to serve on both the investigation and RCA teams to sign a confidentiality agreement in advance, so it is on file. This should clearly outline expectations related to what they can and cannot do with the information they learn through their regular work and through the course of the investigation.

Launching the investigation protocol

When an incident first occurs, the protocol should clearly outline who will initiate the process. Usually, the only people authorized to launch an investigation are a vice president, a plant/site manager, or someone who is designated to act on their behalf.

Responding to a major incident

When an incident occurs, and the investigation team gets called, the investigation team lead must talk the plant/site leader through the immediate steps that should be taken while the investigation team is en route. This obviously includes ensuring the safety of on-site personnel and securing the scene to preserve evidence. The less-obvious includes taking photos immediately if any evidence will be lost, holding workers there who may be going off shift, or at the very least capturing their knowledge of what happened in written form.

Communications

Beyond securing the scene and minimizing any lingering safety threats, one of the first challenges to contend with is communication. This includes proactively pushing out information to appropriate stakeholders, like internal legal and corporate communications departments. It also requires responding to a hunger for information from the families of involved employees, contractors, the surrounding community and media.

A communications protocol must be put into place that clearly outlines which audiences need to be communicated with, order of priority/urgency, who should do the communicating, and – in concept -- what information is appropriate for each audience. The team should clearly understand the difference between hearsay/speculation and facts that are supported by evidence – and only the facts should be communicated. Conversely, there should be someone designated to field incoming inquiries and needs from each of those audiences, to gather information needed for response, to delegate response as appropriate, and to ensure follow up.

Legal

Another very early consideration is bringing the legal department into the loop. Ahead of time, you should clearly establish who is responsible for making that first call, serving as continuing liaison with legal, and executing whatever legal directs. Together with the legal department, your team must consider the obvious liabilities, and agree upon steps to identify the non-obvious. In some cases, legal may direct you to conduct the investigation internally, but in others – especially when litigation is anticipated – legal might decide to call in external, third-party investigators so there is more credibility in the eyes of law enforcement, opposing counsel, regulators and court.

Gathering evidence

Because plant personnel are likely to be affected by the incident in a variety of ways -- including carrying extra responsibilities and working extra hours – the investigation team members must tailor their information-gathering needs to the needs of their information sources.

For instance, while it is clearly important to ask for witness accounts while their memories are fresh, it may only be realistic to ask for a few minutes of their time on the first pass, knowing that you can go back for more details or perspective later.

People who are slated to conduct interviews in an investigation should have opportunities to build their knowledge and skills in non-crisis mode since some of these skills are intangible and require judgment that you can only really acquire through experience.

It also takes specialized knowledge and experience to make judgment calls about the balance between securing the scene to preserve evidence, and the need to get the processes back online to minimize the cost of an event. This sometimes requires careful prioritization, communication and coordination.

Practice

As mentioned earlier, ivory tower protocols will not effectively prepare an organization for a crisis situation. It is easy for organizations to determine that the risk of an incident is so low, that it is not a valuable use of time to go beyond plan-making. But organizations that have taken that approach and then experienced a crisis will all tell you, they wish not only that they had been more prepared, but that their preparation had enabled them to minimize the consequences more effectively.

Leaders should seriously consider staging a mock event on at least an annual basis. Organizations that do this will tell you that although there was resistance, when an actual incident occurred people looked back and admitted that the drill was valuable. This should be prearranged with a particular site, but should be unknown to the people on the investigation and RCA teams.

Debrief

After a real event, it is tempting to get so wrapped up in the fall-out, and be so eager to get back to your normal routine, that you don't want to think about it anymore. But, whether it was a real or mock event, it is essential to debrief. Focus of course on what went well and what didn't go well, but dig deeper to understand why, to be realistic about team members' preparation and comfort level, and then to identify knowledge- and skill-building that will help improve the situation next time around. A specific action item list should be the outcome, including expectations and timelines for individual and collective improvement.

Carefully consider who should be involved in the debrief. In cases that are especially sensitive, it may be most appropriate to debrief with just the team so it is a safe environment. At some point, it can be very valuable to invite representatives from the plant/site who interfaced closely with the team. In other cases, especially when the team is experienced and confident, it can be valuable to include plant managers and other leaders. This helps boost their confidence in the capabilities of the investigation/RCA teams, and increases their comfort level with calling for help in the future. When other key audiences in the corporation – including upper management and plant/site personnel – see the investigation/RCA teams in action first-hand and have accurate expectations that are met, they are much more likely to support the function culturally, practically and financially.

Keep skills fresh

Even when an incident response goes well and the debrief is positive, it is important to practice regularly. No matter how well-trained and knowledgeable you are, your skills can become rusty if not put into practice.

Conclusion

Your response to major incidents and your ability to prevent them from recurring in the future will be significantly improved by creating detailed crisis response protocols; pre-assigning all responsibilities to the right people; and providing training, practice and refreshers that prepare team members for those roles. Even though day-to-day demands may seem too pressing, continuous education and improvement in crisis preparation will pay off many times over when an actual major incident occurs.

Mike Resimius is a corrective action specialist employed at Ameren UE Generation for 28 years. He holds masters degrees in adult education and educational administration, previously oversaw the training department, and is a Certified Apollo RCA instructor. John Stiller is director of industrial services for Apollo Associated Services, www.apollorca.com. A licensed Professional Engineer, he has 26 years of electric utility experience, including power plant engineering, business process improvement, maintenance management systems, and root cause analysis program initiation and development.