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Recommendations for a successful emergency response

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As we watched the dramatic images of the transformer fires in the Back Bay last week, we knew that facilities managers were having a tough week responding to and controlling the impact on their buildings. Once things had cooled down a bit, we talked with Tony Leonard, the regional facility manager at Liberty Mutual Insurance, and John Frey of UGL Services, the acting director of facilities for the Boston Conservatory, to hear about their experience and ask them what they recommend for a successful emergency response.

Establish and follow your emergency response plan.

Leonard was beginning a night out, meeting friends for dinner, when he saw the news on the television that were showing images of the Back Bay fire. Within minutes, his cell phone was ringing and, dinner plans dashed, he set to work implementing the emergency plan. As the alert commander, Tony keeps a copy of the emergency plan at the office, in his house, and in his car. His advice? Follow your emergency plan. It's good. Follow it from the beginning.

Frey was still at the office when the power went out. At first, it was unclear what had caused the power outage or how widespread it was, but after a while, information started trickling in over people's cell phones about the transformers that had caught fire. Soon he could see the thick black smoke that filled the area. Frey began implementing the Conservatory's critical response plan, which had just been updated in February.

Control communications.

Both Leonard's and Frey's experience demonstrated that having a critical response plan in place and following the plan is the easiest and smartest way to facilitate a smooth emergency response. In each instance plan, following the communication plan was crucial to the success of the response.

In emergency situations, establish an operations center that validates information and distributes it through the proper channels. Without this central communication point, critical information can get buried in between the hundreds of emails that will go back and forth between the project team. Centralized communications will also help reduce the amount of mis-information that can easily be spread in emergency situations.

Communicating with building occupants is also critical. Leonard recommends creating a limited number of pre-approved messages that can be sent out quickly to building occupants. That way, content doesn't have to be created from scratch, edited, and approved before getting information out. If people need to be instructed not to come into the office, it's easy to just hit send and get the word out. If people need to be told to stay inside, it's easy and quick to let them know.

Use social media to your advantage. Frey's experience showed him that in emergency situations,

linking news feeds from the Boston Police Department and Mayor's Office to the Boston Conservatory's Facebook page could provide a central place for students and parents to find reliable information about the situation. Twitter could also be a useful way to spread reliable information, since people are increasingly plugged in to social media on their phones.

Check the basics.

Have an independent engineer evaluate your power and mechanical systems on a regular basis. Someone who is not familiar with your building is more likely to notice if something is missing or wired incorrectly - the kinds of things that are easy to miss by people who work in a building every day. This evaluation should provide facilities managers with the confidence to know that their facilities are able to support their your emergency response plan.

When facing power outages for multiple days, your emergency lights aren't going to be much help, since they are designed to last only a few hours. So make sure you have flashlights and batteries on hand.

Haven't created your emergency plan yet? OSHA (www.osha.gov) and FEMA (www.fema.gov) both have information on their websites to help you get started.

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