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Contingency plans

BY JIM YORK

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Recently, I had a conversation with the president of an environmental claims management company, whose clients include firms that make and/or transport hazardous materials, about his involvement in a product recall situation. I think you'll find that my discussion with the Spill Center's Tom Moses underscores the importance of planning for the unthinkable — no matter what business you're in.

The incident involved a recall of plastic containers containing dishwashing detergent. According to Moses, the detergent had apparently been contaminated with hydrogen peroxide during the manufacturing process. He explained that when combined with an alkaline such as detergent, hydrogen peroxide turns into water and oxygen. In this case, a buildup of oxygen in the containers caused them to swell and burst while in transit or soon after delivery.

The situation was considered hazardous because the detergent — which had been distributed to nursing homes, hospitals, restaurants and college facilities across the country — can damage skin or eyes on contact. The manufacturer immediately contacted the Spill Center to coordinate the recall effort.

Over the next four days, the Spill Center dispatched cleanup contractors to pack the containers in hazmat drums, palletize and placard the loads for transport.

Once the manufacturer instructed its customers to contact the Spill Center, calls came in at a rate of 60 an hour. Some of the callers had contained the material and moved it out of the way. Others wouldn't touch it at all. But the common message was: "We need help now; we want this stuff out of here."

To make matters worse, the recall began on a Saturday, when many of the facilities were either not staffed or closed until Monday. Consequently, coordinating the arrival of the cleanup contractors and the manufacturer's representatives became quite a challenge.

Moses said he'd never seen anything quite as intense as that product recall. This incident offers some important lessons in contingency planning. First, it illustrates how quickly one incident can dramatically alter a routine business process. The detergent manufacturer went from "all-systems normal" to "all hands on deck" in just six hours.

Next, the incident illustrates the importance of partnerships in your contingency plans. Quite simply, this manufacturer lacked the resources to manage an incident of this scale. In turn, the Spill Center relied on a network of more than 3,500 spill cleanup contractors, each of whom had to partner with transportation providers to arrange for the return transit of the



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recalled product.

Finally, the incident illustrates the importance of confronting your staff with the unthinkable. Sure, your contingency plans may seem workable on paper. But the true test is whether they can withstand unforeseen situations. Don't underestimate the importance of dry runs and rehearsals in testing the effectiveness of your contingency plans.

I urge you to look at your own operation. Do you have an incident management plan? Have you tested it in real-world conditions? Would it be effective in an "unthinkable" scenario?

As the detergent recall illustrates, we might not have the luxury of determining the answers to those questions as an incident unfolds.

Jim York is the manager of Zurich Service Corp.'s Risk Engineering Transportation Team, based in Schaumburg, IL.

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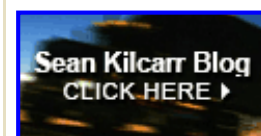
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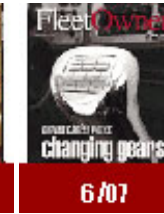
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