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# 5 Disaster Recovery Myths

Make no mistake – FMs are critical players before and after catastrophes

*By Janelle Penny*  
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Is your facility ready to weather a disaster?

Most FMs would answer yes, but most of them would be wrong. Preparation doesn't stop at testing the alarm systems. In fact, the law requires much more emergency planning than many realize.

No one is safe from disaster – not even you. Make sure your facility is truly prepared for the worst by avoiding these five pitfalls.

## **1) YOU'RE NOT AT RISK**

It's tempting to think that your facility is somehow immune to disasters and other emergencies if it's never been affected by a large-scale adverse event before. The truth is that every building is in harm's way. Understanding the risks you face will go a long way toward keeping your occupants safe and minimizing damage to your business.

As you review your plans, consider your vulnerability to all three disaster types:

**Natural:** A naturally occurring disaster is likely the most familiar – certainly you already know if your facility is located near a fault or inside Tornado Alley. This could include anything from weather phenomena to insect infestations or disease outbreaks.

**Man-made:** This category includes both intentional and accidental hazards that become larger disasters if they aren't addressed properly. Crimes and terrorism are man-made disasters, as is civil disorder because it can escalate into destructive behavior.

**Technological:** Many technological disasters are hybrids incorporating elements of natural and man-made hazards – for example, an extended power outage caused by a weather event (natural) may lead to civil disorder (man-made) if the problem cannot be addressed quickly. Other technological disasters include structural collapses and hazardous material exposures.



Not preparing for these contingencies can leave you in a tight spot. On March 17, 2000, lightning struck a high-voltage electricity line in Albuquerque, NM, starting a fire at a Royal Philips Electronics manufacturing plant. Philips techs put out the fire in short order, but the materials to make chips for several thousand cell phones were destroyed. The aftermath is a textbook example of the value of emergency preparation.

The two biggest customers of this Philips branch were Nokia and Ericsson, which were in direct competition with each other. Philips thought the cleanup would take about a week and promised both companies that their orders would be filled first when the plant was ready to produce again.

Nokia executive engineers turned toward their predetermined response plan and split into three teams that developed alternative manufacturing plans, redesigned some chips so they could be produced in other plants, and sought alternative manufacturers. This reduced some of the pressure on Philips, where leaders had realized the projected one-week cleanup would take closer to six weeks instead.

Philips stayed in business, but their success up until that point meant that they had sacrificed surplus capacity in the name of increasing production and performance. When the fire hit, everyone involved had to scramble to develop a solution for Nokia instead of relying on a contingency plan.

As for Nokia's competitor? It reported divisional annual losses of \$1.68 billion that July, outsourced manufacturing to Flextronics, and merged with Sony the next year. "Nobody has an Ericsson phone anymore," notes Al Berman, executive director of the Disaster Recovery Institute.

The Philips fire was contained in 10 minutes, but caused billions of dollars in damage beyond what the fire touched. What would you do if your facility suffered a similar fate? Are you prepared to relocate or coordinate recovery with guests, tenants, or customers if you lose capacity?

“Successful recoveries are all about preparation – knowing the resources you need, where they can be acquired, and how well you can perform using limited resources,” Berman adds. “The Wall Street Journal was literally blown out of the World Trade Center on 9/11. They lost the facility for editorial and advertising, but on Sept. 12, the Wall Street Journal was sitting on my driveway. It was all about preparation and understanding the alternatives.”

## **2) YOUR PLANS ARE ADEQUATE**

How often do you train your employees on your company’s emergency action plan? If you answered “never,” your business is like many others – led by well-intentioned people who believe they’re in compliance with current standards when the truth is anything but.

“The courts have ruled that every kind of disaster is a foreseeable incident,” Berman says. “Failure to prepare and plan are signs of gross negligence, and there’s litigation over almost every disaster that happens because people don’t have the plans they’re supposed to have, are not prepared but are required to be, and are mandated to test those plans to make sure they work but don’t.”

How can you avoid this? Start by taking a look at what your current emergency plans say. Chances are they haven’t been updated recently. Compare them to the current versions of OSHA regulations and NFPA 1600 – is anything missing? At a bare minimum, OSHA 1910.38 mandates the following items in your emergency action plan:

- How to report a fire or other emergency
- Emergency evacuation procedures, including the type of evacuation and exit routes
- Critical plant operations (such as shutting down certain building systems) and who should perform them before evacuating with everyone else
- How to account for all employees after evacuation
- Procedures for employees performing rescue or medical duties
- The names and job titles of employees who can explain the plan and assigned duties
- The employees with special duties in the action plan form your emergency team, an important part of the puzzle. These people will direct evacuations or gather people in designated assembly areas, help shut down utilities, and perform other vital tasks.

The nature of the emergency team demands a well-organized group that can work well together, explains Bo Mitchell, president and founder of 911 Consulting. NFPA 1600 recommends that emergency action plans designate at least one team member for every five employees.

“When I look at emergency plans, the weakest part is most often that the emergency team is too small, it’s not well-constructed, and there’s no clear chain of command,” Mitchell says.

“Facilities people are either ignored or treated as a peripheral. Organizations want somebody from business continuity, HR, or operations to be the top person, yet it’s the facilities people who will get the job done because they’re familiar with all of the equipment.”

Your plan should also identify how to help employees with special needs get to safety. They include not only people with disabilities, but anyone who could conceivably need extra attention, including contractors and visitors who aren’t familiar with your building. If they’re on your premises, they’re your responsibility.

“For emergency response purposes, a pregnant woman under federal law is considered a special needs person during emergencies,” Mitchell explains. “We don’t like them going up and down stairs because that kind of stress can be dangerous. If you’re in a wheelchair, don’t speak English, are on crutches temporarily after surgery, are diabetic – those are special-needs persons. Many state fire codes require that you have a list of them to share with the police or fire captain when he or she arrives.”

Remember that your emergency protocol is never truly complete. It’s easy to let it gather dust after a major update, but you don’t want to realize mid-catastrophe that the team’s contact information is full of phone numbers that don’t work for employees who moved on years ago.

### **3) FIRST RESPONDERS WILL TAKE CARE OF EVERYTHING**

During a major disaster, first responders may not be able to reach you right away, notes 911 Consulting’s Mitchell. In fact, in an incident that overwhelms local resources, you may not be able to get emergency help for days or even weeks. In the meantime, you’re on your own. If some of your employees can’t get out, are you able to shelter them?

For SecureWatch 24, a New York City-based security and surveillance company, the “you’re on your own” principle took a different turn. The company’s bunker-like remote fusion center in Moonachie, NJ, was completed just weeks before Hurricane Sandy hit. Luckily, the facility remained dry, and because its redundancy for all systems ensured uninterrupted data and power, it became a temporary town hall and recovery center for local government and law enforcement.

Could your facility serve as a base of operations? By the same token, do you have a designated emergency operations center in case your facility is out of commission?

For these reasons and more, FMs must play a prominent role in disaster preparation, survival, and recovery. Even if first responders can reach you quickly, no one knows your building as well as you do. If help is delayed, it’s up to you to shut off the right systems and coordinate the interim response. When emergency responders arrive, be ready to brief them on the nature of the problem, its location, and other information they’ll need to contain the threat.

“Make sure the facilities don’t inhibit the ability of emergency personnel to get where they need to go,” notes Thomas “Tom” L. Mitchell, Air Force Lt. Col. (retired), lead facilities and asset management consultant for Booz Allen Hamilton, and past chairman of IFMA’s board of directors. “Response personnel should know the facility layout before they get there. They should know where the hazard areas are and have unfettered access. If you’re uncomfortable with them having a key, put a lockbox at your property’s entry point.”

### **4) THE GOAL IS GETTING BACK TO NORMAL**

Normalcy is one of the goals but it can’t be the only one. You don’t have to live in a state of constant hypervigilance, but you do need to learn from your organization’s preparation, response, and recovery efforts to enable an even smoother process the next time a problem arises.

Bring key decision-makers together to gather unvarnished, honest observations about your organization’s successes and failures in this area. The results of this meeting should be reflected in an updated emergency action plan so that next time you’re using proven effective procedures.

Meanwhile, your facilities team will also assist with the physical recovery efforts – either pitching in with repairs or preparing a replacement space. Now you must communicate with engineers, vendors, and other professionals to ensure your space can house the same functions it did pre-disaster, says Anthony Pizzitola, a disaster recovery and facility professional. That’s why it’s so important to make connections with those people long before an emergency rears its head – once calls start coming in after a disaster, you’ll be hard-pressed to find help.

“Have vendors lined up who can make immediate repairs,” Pizzitola recommends. “Know financially where you’re going to be standing and contact the insurance company beforehand.”

You also need to continually account for the resources used during the emergency for two reasons, Tom Mitchell notes, reflecting on his Hurricane Katrina experiences during his military service as chief of civil engineer emergency management at HQ Air Education and Training Command. It’s essential to document the cost of recovery so you can budget for replacements and repairs. Also, your resources should be restored to their pre-disaster state, a step often overlooked after the worst is over.

“Replenish any supplies you may have used during the recovery period, even if it’s just water that was stored for personnel condition response operations or people in your emergency operations center,” Mitchell adds. “A lot of people don’t think about that because they’re just happy to be past the problem.”

## **5) YOU’RE IMMUNE FROM REPEAT MISTAKES**

Otherwise well-prepared organizations may underestimate their vulnerability to man-made and technological disasters and small-scale emergencies, Tom Mitchell notes, even if there are adequate plans for weather issues.

“A lot of organizations don’t anticipate civil disturbances as something they should plan for,” Mitchell says. “Unless you have a lot of medical emergencies, a lot of people don’t think about what happens if somebody slips on the ice outside of your building, like one of your employees.”

When the immediate emergency is over and recovery is underway, you’re not in the clear. In fact, the biggest challenge you face after a disaster may be your own complacency, Tom Mitchell continues. Resist the temptation to let your guard down – a disaster can strike the same place twice, and the absence of a recent major threat doesn’t mean you’ll never endure an adverse event.

“Gen. George S. Patton once said, ‘Those who fail to plan are planning to fail’ and ‘No plan survives first contact,’” Mitchell says. “No one can completely anticipate the cascading effects a potential threat will have, but there are preparatory steps you can take in advance.

“Emergencies have a habit of causing panic. Panic is driven by fear, and part of that fear is not knowing what’s going on or what to do. If you can mitigate the probability of that occurring, you have a higher probability of ensuring there’s order during a chaotic situation.”

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