

## **PRESENTER'S GUIDE**

# **"DEALING WITH THE MEDIA IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS"**

**Training for the  
OSHA HAZARDOUS WASTE OPERATIONS  
and EMERGENCY RESPONSE (HAZWOPER) REGULATION**

# **OUTLINE OF MAJOR PROGRAM POINTS**

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The following outline summarizes the major points of information presented in the program. The outline can be used to review the program before conducting a classroom session, as well as in preparing to lead a class discussion about the program.

- **Whenever a crisis occurs, the media are there.**
  - They have a duty to keep the public informed.
  - That's why they sometimes need to ask tough questions.
  
- **If the crisis they are covering is a HAZMAT incident where you work, your employer can expect a lot of attention.**
  - Whether your company gives the press the information they are looking for... or doesn't cooperate at all... the reporters will get their stories, no matter what!
  - In the midst of everything that is going on, all too often an ill-advised comment makes the news.
  
- **In a crisis, a company needs to do two things:**
  - Deal with the problem.
  - At the same time, portray itself in the best light.
  
- **In these situations, both management and employees have to work together to protect the company's good name.**
  
- **The media can help, but only if your company works with them properly.**
  - If they get hold of inaccurate information or a rumor, however, the result can be a nightmare.
  - At best, this can give your company a serious "black eye".
  - At worst, it could lead to panic in the surrounding community.

- **So how should an employer handle the press during a hazardous materials incident, and what is an employee's role in this process?**
  - You must be able to answer these questions before you can deal with the media effectively.
  
- **The best strategy to prevent misinformation from spreading during an emergency is to establish a relationship with the media before a crisis occurs. This can include:**
  - Briefing the press about your organization's emergency response program.
  - Inviting them to tour the facility.
  - Even having them participate in some of the company's emergency preparedness activities.
  
- **A company typically shares information with the media through a "Public Information Officer" (PIO).**
  - The PIO is an employee who is specifically trained in how to deal with the media effectively.
  - Sometimes, there is more than one PIO for a facility (this way, there is a backup if the primary PIO is away).
  - If a company has more than one facility, a number of people may be trained to fill the PIO role.
  
- **One of the best things that a PIO can do to establish good relations with the press is to offer them the opportunity to participate in the facility's "responder training."**
  - This is a class on handling emergencies that is typically given at least once a year.
  - It is mandatory for any employees who will be involved in bringing HAZMAT incidents under control.
  
- **By inviting the press to participate in these sessions, a company can cultivate an image of being:**
  - Prepared for any eventuality.
  - Willing to be open to public scrutiny.
  
- **Simply put, this is excellent public relations.**

- **Another positive strategy is to include the media in emergency response "practice sessions" or drills.**
  - This shows the press and public alike that the facility is ready to act quickly in the event of an emergency.
  - Letting the media know beforehand what the company will do in a crisis situation is key.
  
- **Of course, responder training and drills are events that everyone... PIOs, other employees, managers and reporters... hope remain nothing more than exercises.**
  - But what should a company do to work productively with the press if an incident really occurs?
  
- **Let's imagine that an explosion has occurred at your facility. There has been a lot of damage, a number of injuries... even loss of life.**
  - How should a Public Information Officer handle the situation?
  - And what should the average worker do, if approached by reporters?
  - If we look at how PIO's do their jobs, we will also start to understand the responsibilities a typical employee has during a crisis.
  
- **As an emergency unfolds, the most important thing that a PIO does is to make "official" statements at press conferences.**
  - To squelch rumors, and ensure that the public gets accurate reports, the press must be briefed about the incident on a regular basis.
  
- **After the initial briefings, your PIO must inform the media of any new developments regarding the explosion.**
  - Updating reporters periodically is key.
  - If this doesn't happen, they will look for other sources to fill the "information vacuum."
  
- **Much of this can be handled by distributing "information packets" and "press releases".**
  - These should provide detailed information about the company, and authorized statements about the explosion scene itself.

- **In addition to furnishing these planned statements, a PIO can also assist news personnel by being "on-call".**
  - This means that he or she should be easily reached, at any hour, to answer questions.
  
- **One of the problems in dealing with the media during an emergency is that their safety is also a concern.**
  - Reporters should not normally be allowed to enter an incident site while the crisis is occurring.
  - But since most members of the press don't know the dangers that are involved in a HAZMAT emergency, they can get very unhappy about this restriction, and even try to circumvent it.
  
- **So it is important to assure the press that after the situation is cleaned up, and there is no further danger of contamination or injury, the PIO will give them a tour of the incident scene.**
  - Then, during the tour the PIO should pinpoint the areas where the crisis started and any damage it caused.
  - They should also answer all questions as candidly as possible.
  
- **Now that we've discussed the things that the PIO has to contend with, let's look at how employees can work with the PIO when it comes to dealing with the press.**
  - During an incident, always keep in mind that what any employee says to the media is as important as what the PIO says... maybe even more so.
  
- **With HAZMAT emergencies, some members of the press assume that every official announcement is a "whitewash."**
  - Many reporters consider unauthorized statements to have greater credibility than authorized ones.
  - To get a feel for the situation, they try to gauge how a company's employees are reacting.... whether they are calm, and confident that their employer can cope with the situation.
  - These reporters will try to interview anyone they can to get what they think is the real story.

- **Their attempts to "get to the bottom" of the incident can mean real trouble for both the company and any worker who speaks with them.**
  - For example, let's say that a worker gives the press an opinion on how the explosion occurred.
  - Even if the employee meant no harm, this could create an on-going mess that would be difficult, if not impossible, to fix.
  - Because the worker might not know the whole story, or have unknowingly repeated a rumor, the media could report inaccurate or misleading information, striking a devastating blow to the company's reputation.
  
- **Of course, it is easy to say the wrong thing when you are under pressure and being questioned relentlessly.**
  - But this is when helping the company to say the right thing, in the right way, is the most important contribution you can make.
  
- **It's not that hard to handle the media properly. All it takes are a few simple guidelines:**
  - To start, no one should ever say "no comment" to the press (to reporters this comes across as being uncooperative, or even as having something to hide).
  - The best thing to do is refer anyone with a question to the PIO in a polite, yet firm, way.
  
- **However, worse than saying "no comment" is speculating about an incident.**
  - No unauthorized person must ever give information to reporters.
  - The press might automatically assume the statement is official.
  
- **Employees shouldn't even talk to each other about the incident.**
  - Discussing "what might have happened" or "who might have been involved" is often how rumors get started.

- **Don't be lulled into a false sense of security by a reporter's promise to keep your comments "off-the-record".**
  - Everyone can be held accountable for anything they say.
  - Reporters can and will use someone's remarks, even if they say they won't.
  
- **False reports complicate any emergency... they can make a bad situation even worse.**
  - Remember, cooperating with a reporter's request to talk about a HAZMAT incident can result in everybody being misinformed.
  - It could take years for your company to win back people's trust.
  - Clients, business opportunities, jobs (including your own) and millions of dollars could be lost... all over one "off-the-cuff" remark.
  
- **There can be serious personal consequences for workers whose comments cause their employers to lose business as well, including:**
  - Demotions.
  - Transfers.
  - Fines.
  - Termination.
  
- **Reporters are not our enemies.**
  - During an emergency, it's their job to ask questions.
  - If they aren't answered appropriately, it could land your company in hot water.
  - That's why the best way to deal with reporters is to always refer them to your "public information officer"... who can give them the information that they need.

\* \* \***SUMMARY**\* \* \*

- **In a crisis, your company needs to do two things:**
  - Deal with the problem.
  - Portray itself in the best light.

- **Managing the media is an important part of dealing with any emergency.**
- **Knowing what not to say during a crisis can help your company to get through a crisis situation with the least amount of damage to its reputation.**
- **Never say "no comment" to the press.**
  - It makes you appear uncooperative... or like you're trying to hide something.
- **Don't speculate about a crisis situation.**
- **Direct reporters to your public information officer for "official" information.**
- **Most of all, remember that the reputation of any company depends a great deal on how its employees act... especially during a crisis situation!**