



PREPARING FOR **PANDEMICS:** WHAT BUSINESSES NEED TO KNOW



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Trust the experts to help you manage the ongoing **CORONAVIRUS [COVID-19]** pandemic



PREPARING FOR PANDEMICS: WHAT BUSINESSES NEED TO KNOW

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us to expect the unexpected. But, to do that, requires a concerted effort by many employees in a company to create a strong, yet flexible plan. Every plan should address the following:

- Communication,
- Partial/complete shutdown planning,
- Returning to work after weathering the storm,
- Safety training for workers,
- Telecommuting, and
- Recognizing and preventing cabin fever.

Managers may still be trying to overcome the sudden impacts to their company and safety program from the coronavirus (COVID-19). Many companies have recently been affected by state orders and social distancing guidelines. Unless the company has an onsite medical facility, or is one, it might not have a pandemic or infectious disease plan. It can be a chaotic time for any company when many employees call off from work because they're sick or scared about a recent crisis affecting the company.

The current political climate can also be confusing, often sending mixed messages to companies about best practice guidelines, when the economy might recover, government stimulus programs, employee benefits, and worker safety.

The art of managing employees, a company, the safety program, and chaos doesn't come with a step-by-step manual. There isn't much time to learn by trial and error either, especially since COVID-19 is a highly contagious illness. The number of confirmed positive cases, deaths, and



COMPANIES SHOULD NOT MAKE THE **MISTAKE OF STAYING SILENT** DURING A CRISIS

employees who have symptoms of the illness continues to increase across American cities, suburbs, and workplaces.

When looking for new information about COVID-19, networking with peers might not be as helpful as it was before; everyone is following the same information from government agencies. The experienced professionals who might be able to answer questions or provide guidance about best practices — America’s healthcare workers — are very busy saving lives right now. Remember though, this probably isn’t the first time the company has managed something about which it didn’t have a whole lot of knowledge. How did the company get through those challenges? By applying lessons learned from past experiences; working as a team; utilizing company resources; and taking small, effective steps to manage any crisis the company has faced.

COMMUNICATION

Some companies make the mistake of staying silent during a crisis or don’t communicate enough to workers about what’s going on. A crisis could be things like a pandemic, workplace violence, an employee death or injury, a community emergency, or an inclement weather disaster. Workers tend to fill in communication gaps with their own version of what’s happening. This causes confusion, anger, and rumors that only magnify issues for the company.

What advice should the company give to managers about how to effectively communicate with workers?

Managers need the willpower to do the right things for their workers. This includes honesty, transparency, and dedication to the workforce during any crisis. Having these qualities will quickly allow managers to earn their workers’ trust. Every manager or leader needs to remember these three things while communicating to the workforce about a crisis:

1. **LISTEN TO THE WORKERS.** When managers are talking too much, they may not be listening carefully to workers’ concerns. Have a town hall meeting with all workers at the same time, if possible. If there are too many workers or are multiple shifts, conduct smaller town hall meetings. Give workers an opportunity to speak about their concerns and issues. Take notes of what workers are saying and thank them for their input. Be prepared for some employees to grandstand or to become upset. If this occurs, remain calm. Tell these workers in a firm, calm voice to remain professional. Tell workers that issues can be discussed civilly, without yelling or becoming confrontational. If the situation continues escalating, ask the irate workers to leave, or tell them if they don’t calm down, they may be escorted off the property. If managers lose their professionalism, they risk losing other workers’ respect and cooperation. Lead by example, don’t be a hypocrite, and remain calm. The goal is to manage chaos, not to add to it.

2. **COMMUNICATE TO WORKERS.** After meeting with employees, the company will need to communicate its position about the crisis to workers. This should be done in multiple ways, like with an email, an insert in workers' checks, or through frontline supervisors. Don't wait too long to do this. A good rule of thumb is to communicate to workers within one business day after having the town hall meeting. If the company waits too long, workers will start filling in reasons for why it's taking too long. Sometimes complex issues require more time to consult other leaders, risk management, or the legal department. There's no harm in telling workers that the company needs more time to investigate and review matters before they're given a response.

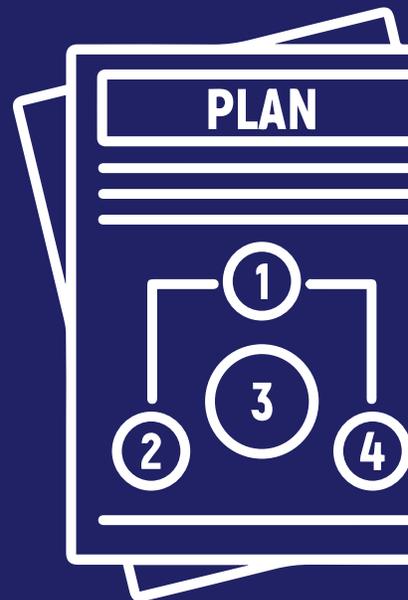
3. **ACT AND RESPOND TO WORKERS' NEEDS.** OSHA, or the company's local state-OSHA agency, will have safety standards that must be followed. Besides meeting employer duties under the standards, managers should respond to their workers' other types of needs too. For example, respiratory protection might not be required at the workplace because there isn't a high enough level of exposure to respiratory hazards. But workers might still want to wear a mask, like an N95 mask, on a voluntary basis for their own peace of mind, comfort, for personal reasons, or due to a state or local requirement. If the workplace has concerns about bloodborne pathogens, a pandemic like an infectious disease, or some other illness, increase housekeeping efforts at the job site using registered disinfectants. There might also be state or city orders that the company must follow, like asking employees questions about their health before reporting to work or screening employees using a touchless thermometer.

Remember, communication doesn't need to be just verbal. Employees take their employers' actions into consideration too when developing an opinion about whether the company cares enough about them or not.

PARTIAL/COMPLETE SHUTDOWN PLANNING

Companies don't naturally intend to shut down for extended periods; it goes against the common reasons for owning and operating a business, like to make money or to provide services and products to consumers. So many efforts go into planning business operations that not enough time is ever spent planning for contingencies like workplace violence, pandemics, inclement weather, or work-related incidents.

With the recent COVID-19 pandemic, many companies and managers have been left scrambling to cope with the health and safety of their workers and their impacted business operations. Every business should have a partial and complete shutdown plan. It might never get used, and hopefully not, but companies need a roadmap about how to sustain the company during a crisis. Create two separate plans, one for each type of shutdown. Federal, state, or local city orders may allow limited business operations to continue or might require a complete shutdown. If there isn't a plan established for each type of shutdown, the company will be trying to figure things out last minute.



COMPANIES SHOULD HAVE TWO SHUTDOWN PLANS IN PLACE IN CASE OF EMERGENCIES:

- ✓ PARTIAL SHUTDOWN
- ✓ COMPLETE SHUTDOWN



TAKING INVENTORY OF YOUR COMPANY'S ASSETS IS CRUCIAL

WHAT SHOULD MY COMPANY INCLUDE IN ITS PARTIAL SHUTDOWN PLAN?

With a partial shutdown plan, the company maintains limited services to customers, will have minimal operations occurring, maintains an essential workforce, and uses only basic company assets to run certain company functions. Here are some key things that should be included in a partial shutdown plan:

- Determine who essential and non-essential employees are. Essential employees are workers that need to be physically present at the company's office or facilities. Non-essential employees might be able to telecommute and support essential employees remotely.
- Determine if there are adequate supplies of laptop computers, printers, software, a remote access terminal, and internet/intranet access for telecommuting workers. Consider providing all workers with a laptop that can be taken home if they need to telecommute. Desktop computers aren't easily portable and can be challenging to move quickly from the office to workers' homes.
- Have an inventory of all the company's assets. This should include personal protective equipment (PPE), safety resources, production equipment, and tools. Have an established standard operating procedure for storing certain equipment or supplies that will require maintenance during storage. Have an emergency supply of PPE to use while performing housekeeping and work activities. Supply chains might be impacted, creating PPE shortages, depending on the type of crisis that's affecting the company. Follow all manufacturers' recommendations from safety data sheets.
- Audit all the company's life-safety systems for deficiencies. These systems include things such as fire alarms, sprinkler systems, smoke detectors, and emergency lighting. Since essential employees may still be in company offices or facilities under a partial shutdown plan, these lifesaving systems must still function properly and be monitored. Call the state fire marshal and see if there are any alerts or orders that apply to the company.

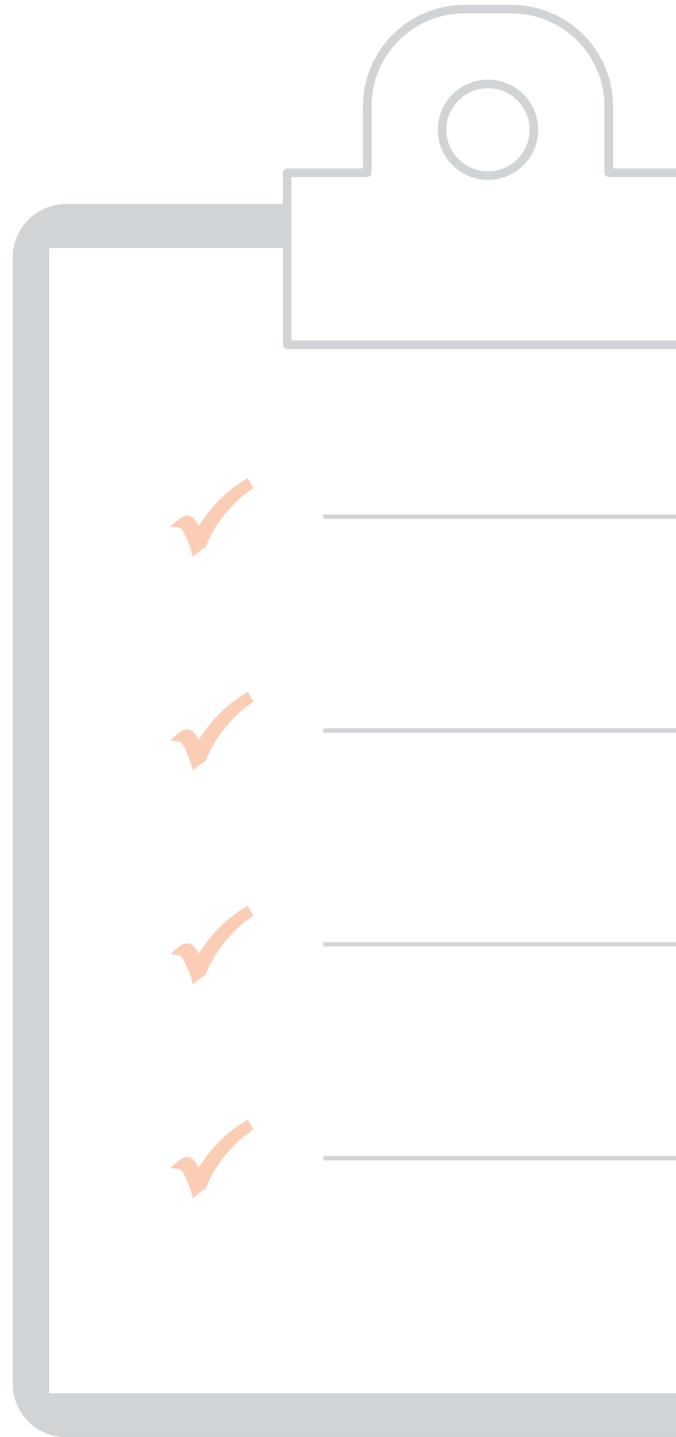
The company's goal during a partial shutdown should be to have only enough workers, assets, services, and systems available to prevent it from closing completely and to weather the storm.

WHAT SHOULD MY COMPANY INCLUDE IN ITS COMPLETE SHUTDOWN PLAN?

Under a complete shutdown plan, the company is prepared to close the business for a period and walk out the door. Assets are stored, workers' employment with the company is terminated, facilities and offices are closed and secured, and business operations and services to customers are all stopped. Here are key things to consider during a complete shutdown:

- Plan for a total shut down of all equipment, life-safety systems, and even utilities like water, internet, and electrical power. Depending on what local requirements are, a fire watch might be required if hazardous materials or volatile chemicals are being stored at the workplace.
- Physically secure all offices and facilities. This might include the need to cover certain windows, storefronts, or doors with plywood or some other type of hard barrier. If the company has private security, consider if patrol routes might need to be altered to provide oversight to unoccupied offices, facilities, and stored assets, to deter loss, theft, or trespass.
- Ensure that all records and electronic databases are preserved. Unless the goal of the complete shutdown is to go out of business, eventually the company will return to normal operations. There are many safety and health records that must be maintained, like injury and exposure records, audits, and permits. Considerations should be made for the storage of these kinds of safety records and other departments' documents too.
- During a complete shutdown, all essential workers, and most non-essential workers' employment, is terminated. It would be common for a company to have its board of directors, executive leadership, and certain members from middle management telecommute still. This ensures that when the business is ready to resume its operations, it has a core leadership team in place who are knowledgeable about safety needs and business operations and can start bringing the business back to normal operations.

If any other of these key points seem too drastic, the company is probably not ready for a complete shutdown, and a partial shutdown should be considered instead.



RETURNING TO WORK AFTER WEATHERING THE STORM

A company that survives a shutdown has faced only half the challenge of managing a crisis. The other half of the challenge is returning to normal business operations. Companies will need to answer tough questions like:

- Are terminated employees still available to work?
- Is safety training required?
- Has machinery and equipment been maintained properly during the shutdown?
- Are vendors and suppliers able to provide necessary safety products needed to protect workers?

WHAT IF THE PANDEMIC IS MAKING IT IMPOSSIBLE TO COMPLY WITH OSHA'S STANDARDS?

There are probably many safety inspections, preventative maintenance, and equipment calibrations that were placed on hold because of the company being shut down. Identify what inspections must be completed to support the company returning to normal operations. This will include safety inspections, such as below-the-hook rigging, lifting devices, and cranes. OSHA has recently issued guidance to its compliance officers to evaluate employers' good-faith efforts to comply with standards first, before commencing any enforcement actions against the company.

During a crisis, like the recent COVID-19 pandemic, vendors may temporarily stop services and support to their customers, impacting companies' abilities to return to normal operations quickly and to comply with the standard. A company may be placed in a queue while the inspection company makes its way through the backlog of inspections. Verify that equipment and tools are safe to use, and any required preventative maintenance was completed properly during the shutdown. If something isn't safe to use, tag it out of service until it can be repaired and deemed safe to use. These are some examples of things that can help a company demonstrate good-faith efforts to OSHA, and possibly avoid enforcement actions.

WHAT ARE SOME SAFETY RESOURCES THAT SHOULD BE READILY AVAILABLE TO EMPLOYEES RETURNING TO WORK, OR TO ESSENTIAL EMPLOYEES WHO REMAIN ON THE JOB?

Make sure safety resources like fire extinguishers, fall protection systems, rescue equipment, and fire detection systems and alarms are functioning properly. Also, check eyewash stations, showers, and first aid kits to verify they are readily available to employees when needed.

- Fire extinguishers must be spaced according to the class of fire hazard that's present in the workplace. Inspect all fire extinguishers to verify their annual inspection has been completed, the pin is in place to prevent accidental discharge, the extinguisher is properly charged, and there are no signs of damage.



MAKE SURE ALL SAFETY RESOURCES ARE FUNCTIONING PROPERLY

- ✓ FIRE EXTINGUISHERS
- ✓ FALL PROTECTION SYSTEMS
- ✓ RESCUE EQUIPMENT
- ✓ FIRE DETECTION SYSTEMS AND ALARMS



- OSHA will use ANSI 358.1 for guidance to determine if an employer has an eyewash unit in place that meets its standard. Ensure that an eyewash unit is accessible to workers if they will be exposed to corrosive materials. Per ANSI, this means that the unit should be placed within 10 seconds of travel time, or within 55 feet of where the exposure to corrosive material can occur.
- According to OSHA, first aid kits should be readily available, meaning they're accessible to employees within three to five minutes of travel time. If first aid kits have expired supplies, use a nearby offsite medical facility until the expired supplies are replaced. Use the company's previous annual injury and illness log to determine what kinds of injuries have occurred at the company in the past. Based on this information, determine what first aid supplies are needed.

Use the workplace safety plan as an auditing tool. Go through the plan page by page and review it carefully. Verify all requirements and resources are in place, make notes on pages in the plan, and checkmark off sections that are being properly implemented at the company. Also, note any corrective actions that are being taken to correct findings.

SAFETY TRAINING FOR WORKERS

Whether the company is hiring new workers, reinstating laid-off workers, or hiring contractors, safety training may be required when the company resumes its operations. After a partial or complete shutdown, certain employees were probably terminated. Most employees will return to the company. Those employees who don't return, may have found work elsewhere. Returning workers may have been laid off from the company for an extended period and need refresher training.

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF TRAINING A COMPANY MIGHT NEED TO CONDUCT?

The company should have all returning workers complete another safety orientation. Existing new hire safety training, or a modified version of it, can be used instead of creating a new one. All returning workers should complete some type of safety training before returning to work.

- If the company has any operators, evaluate their skills to verify they haven't lapsed during the shutdown. For example, if an operator is found to have a skills deficiency, OSHA requires the employer to provide refresher training to the operator.

- New hire workers will need safety training, too. Institute a 30, 60, or 90-day check-in meeting with newly hired workers and ask them what safety concerns they've had. New workers might not feel comfortable voicing concerns to their supervisor yet. This check-in process ensures that new workers have a neutral forum to raise safety concerns while they're onboarding, still learning about the company, and developing professional relationships at the company.

Encourage employees to share past lessons learned and to report any near-miss incidents they observe. These incidents should be investigated and shared across the company. Don't forget about vendors and contractors who might need refresher training too.

TELECOMMUTING

Telecommuting is a way to have employees continue working without physically being present in the office or at the company's facilities. Due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, many companies have moved to telecommuting as a temporary business model, or have a hybrid model, with some employees working from home and essential employees physically present at their facility.

WHAT ARE SOME THINGS THAT A COMPANY SHOULD CONSIDER WHEN DECIDING IF CERTAIN WORKERS SHOULD TELECOMMUTE?

The company needs a certain amount of work to get done daily to support business operations. There isn't a group of coworkers back in the office who can pick up the slack. Telecommuting allows for continuity of business operations and may prevent a company from permanently needing to close its doors or from stopping all services to its customers.

Develop a safety plan for workers who are telecommuting. Certain injuries or illnesses can be work-related if they occur while performing work, the employee is being paid, and they aren't caused by the worker's general home environment. For example, OSHA says that if a worker is electrocuted because of faulty wiring in the house, it's not work-related. But if an employee drops a box of work documents on his or her foot, and is injured, it would be work-related.

With the recent COVID-19 pandemic, many employers are now thinking twice about paying for expensive office spaces. Many workers like the increased work-life balance they didn't have before and don't need to endure a daily commute into the office. Whether telecommuting is a temporary work setting for workers, or will be the new norm for the company, having a specific safety plan for at-home workers will ensure their safety concerns and needs are addressed.



A COMPANY MAY
NEED TO PROVIDE
**REFRESHER OR
NEW HIRE TRAINING**
TO OPERATORS ACCORDING
TO OSHA STANDARDS

RECOGNIZING AND PREVENTING CABIN FEVER

Cabin fever is usually associated with the wintertime because people are stuck indoors for a while. In a news report, the Governor of New York described cabin fever as an “accompanying affliction to coronavirus.” Employers should consider that their workers could experience cabin fever when stay-at-home orders are in effect across America. Workers' productivity, especially teleworkers, can be affected by cabin fever.

IS THERE A MEDICAL DEFINITION FOR CABIN FEVER AND WHAT ARE SOME OF ITS SYMPTOMS THAT WORKERS SHOULD WATCH OUT FOR?

Doctors say that there isn't a medical definition or diagnosis for cabin fever; rather, it's a set of symptoms. Here are some telltale signs:

- Irritability,
- Sadness or depression,
- Impatience,
- Food cravings,
- Low motivation, and
- Inability to handle stress.

WHAT ARE SOME THINGS THAT WORKERS CAN DO TO PREVENT CABIN FEVER?

Here are some tips that may prevent cabin fever and could help encourage productivity among teleworkers:

- Acknowledge cabin fever exists and review options for access to employee assistance programs.
- Conduct video conferences with employees at least once per week. Talking over the phone together may not be enough. There are plenty of applications, software, and technology available to support convenient team interactions.
- Add some laughs. There may a lot of work to complete, but don't hesitate to mix in some comedy relief occasionally. This might include a tasteful joke via email, some personal conversation with employees, or everyone sharing something important to them.

A safe, healthy home environment is important in order to ensure employees remain productive and aren't distracted while working from home. Although important and necessary, stay-at-home orders feel like a double whammy, especially for employees living in colder climate states. First, there was the gloom of winter, and now there's the boredom of being on lockdown. If the company has given workers safety tips that they could use at home in the past, this is a great time to dig those topics out and revisit them with workers.



**POSITIVE
MENTAL
HEALTH
HELPS ENCOURAGE
PRODUCTIVITY OF
TELECOMMUTERS**

CONCLUSION

Managers and safety professionals make tough, calculated decisions each day for their workers and know how to cope with difficult situations. Communities, employers, workers, suppliers, and the government have come together recently to battle COVID-19. News stories are filled with acts of kindness. For example, employers are donating their personal protective equipment to hospitals, teachers are empowering their students to learn remotely, employers are going above and beyond their legal duties and caring for their workers' personal needs, and the government has a different, focused attitude towards citizens.

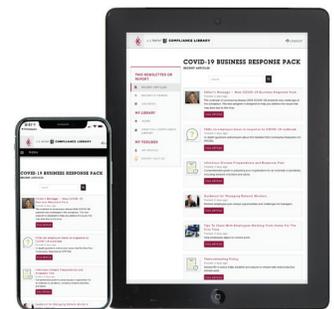
Workers may not understand the standards or the law, but they're keen about whether their employer cares about them or not. If the workers feels that their employer doesn't care about them, or is hiding something, they tend to assume things, often leading to the wrong assumptions. Take a team approach and manage workplace COVID-19 issues with workers, taking a family-style approach and show workers the company cares for them. Any crisis can suddenly impact a company's operations. Remember though, a company's employees will be its strongest asset in weathering the storm and successfully resuming normal operations.

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