

Enhance Your “Fire Fighting” Skills

The most productive individuals are those who master the art of taking care of emergency situations, unexpected and unplanned, that require immediate attention to prevent serious consequences. “Fire fighting” is the usual term for handling a crisis. “Fire fighting” ranges from such relatively simple problems as soothing an unhappy customer to solving a major emergency production or personnel problem.

Obviously, true emergencies must be handled immediately. This often means pushing aside planned activities and rearranging schedules to take care of the emergency.

Prevention Is Key

The ideal, of course, is to prevent emergencies. If you suspect you are spending too much time “fire fighting,” keep notes over a period of a week or a month describing the various situations that require emergency action. Identify the location of the fire and what is lost. Who is the arsonist? Who is usually the fire fighter? Is some kind of psychological reward being sought by either arsonist or fire fighter – or both? List the causes, the actions taken, and the results for each crisis handled. Then compare the circumstances to find any pattern that exists. Decide how you can best prevent future crises. Consider instituting necessary training, giving appropriate feedback, setting up proper controls, or delegating appropriate responsibility. Design new procedures, perform necessary maintenance, or install new equipment – whatever your analysis indicates is needed.

Handling Emergencies

Even the best planning and training fail to prevent an occasional unanticipated situation that must be handled on the spot. When vital machinery breaks down, key people are sick or hurt, or outside circumstances affect your work, adjustments must be made. When a crisis occurs, minimize lost time by following these suggestions:

- ❖ Stay calm. The existence of a crisis implies that something is out of normal control. If, in addition, you lose control of your emotions, it becomes difficult to make rational decisions that meet the needs of the moment.

Tell yourself, “I’ve solved harder problems under pressure. I can solve this one, too.” Your calm, matter-of-fact acceptance of the situation and the assumption that it can be handled keep both you and other people calm and able to bring the situation back under control.

- ❖ Isolate the major consideration. When a crisis arises, something will probably be lost as a result of the situation – either time, money, or materials. Decide what loss can be tolerated and what loss must be avoided. Isolate the root problem so you can immediately respond to the real

issue. Your objective is to solve the problem and regain control without a critical loss. For example, perhaps a breakdown occurs that will cause a delay in the production of a component needed to fill an important order. You realize that a time delay would represent a substantial loss for this important client. Failure to meet your obligations to this customer is a loss you cannot afford. You would be well advised, therefore, to authorize overtime for repairs and production, or to shift the critical component to another production line and delay work on a less critical job.

- ❖ Return conditions to normal as soon as possible. The objective in crisis management is to take personal charge of the situation for only as long as you are needed. Make the suggestion, take the action, give the instruction, and then

step out; let the person who is normally in charge complete the job. Offer only the necessary help and trust your people to carry through.

- ❖ Learn something from each crisis. The handling of each crisis situation should make a direct contribution to future crisis prevention. After the excitement is over and the situation has returned to normal, hold a debriefing session to discuss the crisis with those involved to determine how a similar emergency can be avoided in the future. Make this a training opportunity and a planning experience. The more all team members learn about crisis management, the more capable they will be to handle future emergencies and the less you will be required to become involved yourself.

