

Essential Emergency Drills for the Workplace

By [Rob Burton](#) | Nov 8, 2022

Many businesses don't think about emergency drills until there's an actual emergency – a huge yet common mistake that makes the organization far less prepared to withstand the effects of emergencies. It's the well-drilled organization that has maximized its emergency preparedness.

What is an Emergency Drill?

An emergency drill is a practice run of an emergency procedure. It can be used to test the response of employees, facilities, and systems to an emergency. Emergency drills could be conducted for fire drills, active shooter drills, earthquake drills, etc. There could be drills just for the evacuation of a location, needed for any number of reasons beyond the indispensable fire drill. You may find that specific types of evacuations are needed in response to emergency situations that your own risk assessment has identified. And, of course, some drills are required by regulators within specific industries.

Why are Emergency Drills Important?

Emergency drills are essential because they help employees and businesses prepare for actual emergencies. By running through the steps of an emergency procedure, all levels of employees, including senior management, learn what to do in an emergency. After the drill, it can be analyzed to identify any areas that need improvement.

Additionally, emergency drills help businesses identify any weaknesses in their overarching, more generalized emergency plans, of which the drill is a part, so that any weaknesses in the overall plans can be fixed before an actual emergency occurs.

Before conducting an emergency drill there are two critical components to consider. The first is the risk assessment, which, when completed helps to create the second component, the Emergency Action Plan. The risk assessment will drive certain parts of your emergency procedures within the Emergency Action Plan.

The Emergency Action Plan Identifies Risk and Defines What to do in an Actual Emergency

After conducting a risk assessment that identifies and prioritizes the most likely/most damaging emergencies that could occur, you can then proceed to develop an Emergency Action Plan. This plan should address what you've found to be the highest priority risks associated with your workplace and define precisely what employees should do in those emergency situations. The Emergency Action Plan should be reviewed and amended regularly to ensure that it is always up-to-date and relevant to your workplace. As with most plans, changes will need to be made after a drill is conducted. For instance, you may find during a fire drill that your notification procedure is not as clear as it could be and therefore updating the plan is important.

Components that go into an Emergency Action Plan

Before running the emergency drill, you will need to have an Emergency Action Plan that details the assessed risks within your environment:

- **A clear chain of command:** In an emergency, it is important that there is a clear chain of command. This will ensure that everyone knows who is in charge and who to listen to.
- **An evacuation plan:** Evacuation plans should be specific to your workplace. They should identify all exits and routes to safety. Employees should be familiar with the evacuation plan so that they know where to go in an emergency.
- **A shelter-in-place plan:** A shelter-in-place plan should be developed for situations where it is not safe to evacuate the premises. This could include severe weather conditions or part of an active shooter approach such as Run-Hide-Fight. The shelter-in-place plan should identify a safe location for employees to go to and should be reviewed regularly. One other example where shelter-in-place plans are prominent are in areas that are exposed to tornadoes.
- **A communication plan:** A communication plan should be developed to ensure that everyone is made aware of the emergency procedures. The communication plan should include a way to contact employees who are not on site, such as through a text message, email or via an electronic communications application.
- **An incident command system:** An incident command system (ICS) should be established to help manage an emergency. The ICS is a standardized system used by first responders and businesses to coordinate their activities during an emergency.
- **A tabletop exercise plan:** Tabletop exercises are important for management to walk through scenarios based on the risks defined in the risk assessment. Bringing operators and communicators together to walk through the EAP is a good first step before running a full emergency drill. Tabletop exercises can also be integrated into your emergency drills. You can run an evacuation drill and simultaneously have the crisis / emergency response team virtually assemble to run through their response procedures that would accompany an actual evacuation.

Once the emergency action plan is in place, you can begin to develop your emergency drills.

How to Conduct an Emergency Drill

Once you have developed an Emergency Action Plan, you can begin planning your emergency drills. When conducting an emergency drill, it is important to follow these common steps:

- Make sure all employees are aware that a drill is taking place. This is important in most drills, but especially those that could have greater impact if, for example, some employee mistakenly thought an active shooter evacuation drill was the real thing.

Management must ensure that everyone is made fully aware of the drill and when it will take place so that drill participants are fully prepared.

- If possible, choose a time when your business is not busy. This will ensure that employees can focus on the drill and not be distracted by their work.
- Ensure safety is made a priority when conducting the movement of personnel during the drill. Safety is always first.
- Review the Emergency Action Plan with all employees so that they know what to do during the drill.
- Run the drill, to the extent possible, as if it were an actual emergency. This will help employees to better understand what they need to do in an actual emergency.
- Post drill, employees can be empowered to help management identify any areas that need improvement and changes can then be made to your emergency procedures accordingly.

The Fire Drill

According to the **National Fire Protection Association**, local fire departments responded to 1,353,500 fires in 2021. These fires caused 3,800 civilian deaths, 14,700 civilian injuries and \$15.9 billion in property damage.

The fire emergency drill is one of the most common types of emergency drills. This drill is conducted to test the response of employees to a fire in the workplace. The fire emergency drill should be conducted at least once a year and more frequently if your workplace has a higher risk of fire.

One particularly important aspect of conducting a fire drill is to ensure it is conducted in a safe and controlled manner. Are you evacuating a high-rise in a city, a smaller office building with hundreds of employees, or a small warehouse or factory that is a complex environment. What about industrial locations where workers are spread throughout hundreds of acres where communications and emergency response would be challenging?

Some local fire departments might participate in your fire drills or other emergency training exercises, especially if you have a location with a large group of employees or a high-risk operation. Coordinate with your local fire department(s) as they should want to at least walk through your locations, which helps them with their planning and response capabilities.

When conducting fire emergency drills, it is important to follow these five simple steps:

1. **Create a Schedule:** Schedule fire drills on a regular basis but not on the same time and day each period. If you run the same fire drill on the same day at the same time each period, it may create a false sense of security. Conduct them as often as your operations allow.

2. **Have a Fire Drill Plan:** Create a fire drill regimen that ensures everyone, including any visitors or sub-contractors that might be temporarily in your facility or office, understand what to do in the event of a fire and follow that narrative during the drills. If you have fire wardens on each floor or in each area, their role should be practiced during each drill. Where evacuees should go after leaving the premises during the drill is important and should be documented in your Emergency Action Plan. There should be a communications component within your fire drill plan that highlights how the drill will be activated, communications during the drill, as well as when it concludes.
3. **Consider Varying Scenarios:** If you just run the same standard scenario during each fire drill, it may create a false sense of reality. Actual reality is that not every fire in your building or environment would be the same. Consider simulating the blocking of a stairwell to replicate smoke coming up it so those exiting the location must consider an alternate route. What about simulating a few of your employees missing? (The official term is “unaccounted for.”) This sort of added challenge to the drill will help validate your communication protocols and accountability process.
4. **Take a Safety-First Approach:** Ensuring the drill is executed in an orderly and safe manner is important. Only when the drill has concluded, based on parameters that you created prior to each drill, can you then release the employees back to work. Have a formal ending to the drill and communicate that ending through communication systems or other tools you may use as part of your communications plan.
5. **Document and Improve:** There will be opportunities to improve your Emergency Action Plan based on the results from your fire drills. Document the date and how long the evacuation took from start to finish, who participated and if there were any key findings. Improve the plan by updating it based on any of the findings. You can ensure those updates work during your next fire drill.

The Active Shooter Drill

- The FBI defines an active shooter as one or more individuals actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area. In 2021, the FBI has designated **61 shootings** as active shooter incidents — a 52.5 percent increase from the previous year. Another data resource that seems to be quoted often is the [Gun Violence Archive](#) which, using different definitions than the FBI, states there were 611 mass shootings in 2020.

- The active shooter drill is conducted to test the response of employees to an active shooter or violent intruder in the workplace. This type of drill should be conducted at least once a year and more frequently if your risk assessment finds that your workplace has a higher risk of such incidents. You can also combine these drills with a tabletop exercise where your management gathers to support the simulated emergency.
- Have you conducted active shooter training? The answer to this question should be “yes” before you start to plan your active shooter emergency drill. Ensure everyone understands what the protocols are with respect to responding to an active shooter or violent intruder situation. It can be a difficult conversation to have but it may be essential if you want to mitigate some or all of this risk. One common methodology is **Run-Hide-Fight** but there are others and you should do your research before determining what’s best for your organization.

When conducting an active shooter drill, consider the following three steps:

2. **Create an Active Shooter Drill Plan:** When preparing for your active shooter drill, ensure you have a very clear and achievable plan in how you’re going to execute the drill. If you don’t spend the time creating a detailed drill plan, even for a simple active shooter drill, you may create a real emergency. Part of your plan is a having clear communications that ensures everyone has been communicated with even if they’re not actively part of the drill. You also need to consider a scenario for each drill. Don’t make it the same one each time as it could create complacency.
3. **The Drill:** Walk before you run is important with these types of emergency drills. We want to make sure everyone gets out of the building or into a shelter-in-place environment in a safe and controlled manner. Make safety a top priority in your active shooter drills. “This is a Drill” or similar terminology needs to be used throughout the drill. If you have a large body of personnel and/or a complex environment, consider using monitors and safety staff to support the drill. Those supporting your drill should be documenting the findings.
3. **Update the Active Shooter Plan:** Once you have completed the active shooter drill, you will need to update the active shooter plan. This is to ensure that any gaps regarding the drill are remediated as soon as possible to ensure continuous improvement. You will want to observe the changes you’ve made during the next drill to confirm that those changes are working as planned.