

Case Study: The High Cost of Good Intentions

Valseca Corporation, an import-export business based in Mexico City, D. F., Mexico, maintains offices in a two-story building in an older section of the city. The original building structure is quite old, with wood framing. While the exterior is quaint and attractive, the interior is modern and corporate with an eclectic, Latin-American flair. The site is surrounded by the narrow and congested old streets of a previous era, which first led management of this 50-person company to develop basic evacuation procedures in 2004.

Because of abutting buildings on both sides of the building, the only usable exits are through the main doors in front and a rear door to a small parking area. A single staircase located toward the center of the building serves the second floor. The evacuation plan calls for employees on the second floor to use the windows on the east side of the building to exit onto the adjoining single-story building's roof if needed. Sad to say, the evacuation plan, that was created with the best intentions in 2004, was given only minimal maintenance after the initial evacuation initiative.

In late 2008, an electrical fire started around midday in some computer equipment which was right at the base of the central staircase. Unfortunately, this equipment was directly adjacent to a large, open file area, and the fire spread rapidly to some paper files. Billowing smoke spread, and flames surrounded the central stairway, making it impassable.

Employees on the first floor rushed to the two exits, pretty much ignoring any evacuation procedures. Since there had been little training, most were not really familiar with the documented procedures anyway.

Seeing the stairway blocked by flames, employees on the second floor began to panic. A few rushed to the front or the back windows; some actually jumped out onto a parked van outside a rear window. Several employees escaped out the side windows onto the adjoining rooftop, only to discover that in the years since that procedure had been written, that rooftop had been completely surrounded with fencing and barbed wire. In effect, they were trapped and were in far greater danger should the fire spread to that all-wood structure before rescue arrived.

A number of employees suffered injuries, although, fortunately, none were serious. Two employees subsequently refused to work on or ever go to the second floor again. One long-time, valued employee resigned. Litigation, productivity losses, and other direct costs were significant. Aside from property loss, business interruption, and other tangible losses, avoidable losses related specifically and directly to the failed evacuation amounted to over US \$750,000.

Discussion Questions – Phase 3

Because of the significance and the relative uniqueness of the procedures and processes involved in Phase 3 fact-finding, as you determine the needs and requirements of the people for whom the EEP is designed, it is a good idea for you to spend some time reflecting on whether you fully understand and appreciate what you are getting into. Perhaps it would be useful to try to explain the process, and how it is performed, to someone else. This will give you the opportunity to put the ideas into your own words and check that it all makes sense.

1. Are you familiar with any, or all, of the laws, guidelines, and standards which might be issued by local authorities, regulators, networking groups, trade bodies, or trade unions? Could you, through your colleagues or your organization, have access to any groups or societies which provide occasional advice and guidance to their members?
2. Are there any guidelines available to you that may be relevant to your particular type of industry or location? Are you a member of a professional body which might be a source of useful information in this connection?
3. Can you already begin to envisage the manner in which you will approach this body of work? Do you have some idea of the time frame involved? Perhaps you can try to calculate the work-hours involved and estimate how and when you will be able to gain the cooperation of your colleagues? What milestones would help you monitor your progress with this work.
4. You cannot, from a practical standpoint, explore the needs the Phase 3 requirements for EEP entirely on your own. Who can you identify as good candidates for your “team”? From what departments should they come? What backgrounds and skills would be useful? What should be their experience with the facility? How will you explain your research needs to them (or to their supervisors if necessary)?
5. Re-read the case study about the Mexico City factory. What lessons have you learned from this section of the book that could prevent a failed evacuation of this type from ever happening in an organization for which you work?