Organisational lockdown

In this modern age we all expect to be safe whilst we are at work. Employers have a duty of care to do whatever is reasonably practicable to protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees and visitors whilst on their premises.

The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 addresses most of the risks that we may incur while carrying out our daily tasks. While this covers a wide range of hazards, there are unforeseen circumstances which require staff and visitors to take more extreme action. The usual hazard that comes to mind is fire, and factories and offices should have an effective fire policy and an alarm system installed to inform those within the building to evacuate immediately.

However, in this modern age there are circumstances in which evacuation is the wrong course of action and could lead staff and visitors into greater danger than if they remained securely within the building. This is usually referred to as a lockdown situation.

What is lockdown

A lockdown is a precautionary emergency protocol; a sensible and proportionate response to any external or internal incident which has the potential to pose a threat to the safety of staff and visitors. A partial lockdown is a response to an impending threat and usually means that doors leading outside are locked to prevent people entering or leaving. A full lockdown should be enacted when the threat is imminent or more extreme. It takes the response a stage further ensuring that nobody should enter or leave a building, and all occupants should go to the nearest safe, enclosed room, keep away from windows and remain quiet.

At risk organisations

Lockdowns have been widely reported in schools in the USA resulting from armed intruders, but recent years have seen an increase of occasions when schools in the UK have gone into lockdown. However, there are many other organisations that face similar threats to the safety of staff and visitors. This is particularly relevant to those establishments open to the public, with recent attacks occurring in Manchester, Birmingham and London.

Therefore any organisation that experiences a high number of visitors such as public offices, transport hubs, healthcare facilities, entertainment venues, hotels and even places of worship may be at risk. In addition, key industrial and commercial organisations, especially those such as energy, communications and chemical processing may potentially also be subject to threats.

Many schools and hospitals have a formal lockdown protocol in place and hold practices just in case it needs to be actioned, but very few other organisations have established formal procedures to deal with a lockdown situation should it arise.

Lockdown Triggers

A lockdown generally results from a potential intruder on or near the premises who may be armed or is perceived to be a threat. However, a lockdown may be instigated from other causes, such as a major accident where contamination could threaten staff or visitors. This could be chemical, atmospheric pollution (smoke plume, gas cloud etc) or even a cyber attack which could cause a loss of utilities and compromise the whole organisation. It may result from an on-site incident, but a lockdown could also be initiated due to a nearby incident such as a chemical leak, civil disturbance, major fire or other emergency which could put employees at risk.

What to do

Just as all organisations have an emergency plan in place in the event of a fire, those at high risk should also have a lockdown protocol. It should specify the procedures that need to be enacted. Regular practices or drills should be also undertaken so everybody knows exactly what to do should a lockdown be actioned. Many schools and hospitals have a lockdown action plan in place and these can provide a useful template for other organisations.

Below are some points for consideration:

Distinct alerts: A clear signal that is audible throughout the organisation is essential to alert all occupants that a lockdown is enacted. Using a fire bell or general alert is not recommended as it may cause confusion. This is a recommendation from the National Counter Terrorism Security Office (NaCTSO). Specific alerts should differentiate evacuation from lockdown.

Identify key places: All doors and windows in public and private areas of the building should be identified so they can be secured quickly.

Communication: Everybody, including employees and visitors, should be made aware of procedures so they know what to do in the event of a lockdown.

Regular practices: Lockdown procedures should be practised by all staff, and key personnel undergo refresher training so that everybody knows what to do should a lockdown be actioned.

Summary

Ultimately, there are many circumstances which could cause a lockdown but fortunately they are few and far between. It should be stressed that the probability of an incident involving an intruder seeking to cause harm or a contamination risk is very low. However, in exactly the same way that organisations should prepare for a fire, they should be prepared to respond to all eventualities. Having a plan in place can minimise risk, prevent harm and protect the reputation of your organisation.

References
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