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Emergency Preparedness – Would Your Workplace Pass a Real Emergency Test?

Evacuation when it is unsafe inside. Duress/lockdown when it is unsafe outside.

An alarm sounds. Employees leave the building and assemble at the familiar point. But what if the danger is waiting outside? Conversely, what happens when occupants are told to lock down while smoke is entering their room? A credible emergency plan must distinguish between escaping an unsafe building and avoiding an immediate external threat. Neither instruction is appropriate for every emergency.

Two different protective responses – one risk-based plan

EVACUATION: Move people away from danger when remaining inside is unsafe, for example, from fire, smoke, a suspected structural failure or another hazard threatening the occupied area. The chosen route and assembly point must themselves be safe.

DURESS / LOCKDOWN: Keep people away from an immediate external threat when moving into open areas would increase exposure, for example, armed violence nearby, violent unrest or a hazardous swarm of stinging insects outside. Lockdown for an assailant and sheltering against an outdoor environmental or animal hazard require different room choices and precautions; the procedures must not be treated as interchangeable.

Am evacuation alarm and a duress alarm should be distinguishable and understood by occupants. The response must allow an authorised person to change or override instructions as new information emerges.

The legal foundation in South Africa

The Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993 (OHSA) provides the overarching duties. Section 8(1) requires employers, as far as reasonably practicable, to provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risk to employees' health. Section 8(2)(a), (b) and (d) concerns safe systems of work, hazard prevention and the identification of hazards and precautions; section 8(2)(e), (g), (h) and (i) addresses instruction, training, supervision and enforcement. These provisions are relevant to reasonably foreseeable emergency scenarios.

Section 9(1) concerns persons other than employees who may be directly affected by an employer's activities, including learners, visitors and contractors. Section 13(a) addresses communicating workplace hazards and precautions; section 14 sets out employees' general duties. Section 16 addresses the chief executive officer's

responsibilities and the possible assignment of duties. These sections do not prescribe a standard signal, a universal number of drills per year or one mandatory lockdown method for all workplaces.

General Safety Regulations, regulation 13J (inserted by Government Notice 5954 of 6 March 2025), deals specifically with fire precautions and means of egress: escape doors and exits, clear escape routes, suitable stairways, sufficient means of egress subject to the regulation's qualifications, and suitable maintained firefighting equipment. Regulation 3(1) addresses reasonable steps to ensure prompt first aid following injury or emergency. Requirements under other applicable legislation, local fire by-laws, the National Building Regulations, and sector-specific rules must be considered separately.

Scenario 1 – Unsafe outside: Duress or lockdown

Fictitious example: A school receives a credible report of an armed individual near its entrance while learners are outside between lessons. The security response should communicate a distinct alert, directs occupants away from the threat where safe, secures suitable rooms, contacts SAPS and accounts for groups without exposing staff to danger. Individuals already outside are directed towards the safest available escape or protection.

For violent unrest outside premises, keep people away from perimeter windows, gates and exposed courtyards; control access where safe; monitor official information; and identify protected interior areas and alternative evacuation routes. For swarms of stinging insects, move people away from the swarm into an appropriate enclosed space where feasible, close openings, avoid provoking the insects, and request specialist assistance. Medical response plans should address serious allergic reactions.

Scenario 2 – Unsafe inside: Evacuation or relocation

Fictitious example: Smoke is discovered in a factory storeroom. Employees hear the evacuation alert and use an unaffected escape route rather than passing through smoke. The nominated team checks areas only where safe, contacts emergency services, and conducts accountability at a protected assembly area. Nobody re-enters until the appropriate authority confirms it is safe.

Fire or smoke: Raise the alarm, alert emergency services, use safe escape routes, avoid smoke-filled areas and do not delay for belongings. Firefighting is only for competent, appropriately equipped persons where the fire is small, their escape remains assured and conditions are safe. An assembly point exposed to smoke, traffic or another hazard must be replaced with a safer alternative.

Structural instability: Following signs of imminent collapse, impact damage or significant cracking accompanied by other warning signs, isolate affected areas and relocate occupants by routes assessed as safe. Avoid suspected unstable sections and await competent structural or emergency-services advice before reoccupation.

Bomb threat or suspicious item: Do not assume that automatic evacuation via the normal route is always safer. Record the threat information, notify SAPS/security promptly and follow the site's threat-assessment arrangements and police advice. Do not touch, move or investigate a suspicious item. Routes and assembly points must avoid the suspected danger. The emergency plan must provide for these decisions.

The weaknesses a real emergency exposes

- One alarm for every event. If everyone interprets every signal as "go outside", a security incident may become more dangerous.
- One assembly point. A fixed gathering place may be compromised by smoke, an attacker, unrest, falling debris or insects.
- No system to account for people. Registers, visitor records, contractor lists and group counts must be accessible and workable without placing staff at risk.
- No provision for vulnerable occupants. Plans must accommodate young learners, people with disabilities, mobility or sensory needs, patients and those needing assistance.
- Unclear authority. Staff must know who can initiate an alert, contact responders, change the response and authorise re-entry, including in the absence of senior management.

- Equipment that fails in practice. Alarms, communication systems, emergency lighting, access controls, medical resources and alternative power should be checked as appropriate.
- Unsafe door controls. Security measures must be coordinated with compliant fire escape arrangements; access-control or lockdown hardware must not unlawfully obstruct emergency egress.
- A drill that measures speed only. Quick evacuation cannot compensate for an unsafe route, an unaccounted visitor or an assembly point in danger.

What a defensible exercise should test

Plan and document different exercises for fire evacuation and duress/lockdown. Brief responders and use risk-controlled simulations: do not use realistic firearms, surprise active-shooter enactments or deliberately frightening scenarios, particularly with children. A tabletop exercise may be preferable for sensitive threats. Avoid blocking genuine escape routes during drills.

- Activation: Was the threat correctly recognised, the appropriate alert given and emergency services contacted?
- Decision-making: Did the responsible person assess whether inside, outside or a particular route was safer?
- Communication: Did employees, security, contractors, visitors and vulnerable occupants receive clear, accessible instructions?
- Accountability: Could responsible staff establish who was missing, last known locations and who required assistance without an unsafe search?
- Operational performance: Were routes, doors, keys/access controls, communications, medical readiness and alternative arrangements functional?
- Recovery: Was there a controlled all-clear, safe re-entry decision, incident communication and post-exercise support?
- Corrective action: Were observations documented with owners, deadlines, priority and evidence of closure?

A practical readiness question for management

Ask: If the emergency happened during lunch, after school, on a night shift or while contractors were on site, would every person know whether to leave, remain protected, or move to another safe location? If the answer depends on one individual or one alarm, preparedness needs strengthening.

Contingency Planning – Ensuring Business Continuity After an Emergency

Emergency preparedness does not end when everyone has been safely evacuated, or the immediate threat has been brought under control. Organisations must also consider how they will maintain or restore their essential operations following an emergency. A fire, structural failure, violent incident, prolonged power interruption or other major disruption may render premises inaccessible, damage critical infrastructure or prevent employees from performing their normal duties.

A contingency plan should form part of the organisation's broader emergency preparedness and business continuity arrangements. Its purpose is to identify essential functions, determine how long these functions can reasonably be interrupted and establish practical alternatives to minimise disruption while protecting employees and other affected persons.

Contingency planning should address:

- Critical operations: Identify essential services and activities that must continue or be restored as a priority.
- Alternative facilities: Arrange suitable temporary premises, remote working arrangements or alternative service locations where practical.
- Personnel and responsibilities: Identify key personnel, their responsibilities and suitable substitutes should appoint individuals be unavailable.
- Communication: Establish procedures for informing employees, clients, parents, contractors and other relevant stakeholders of operational changes.

- Essential resources: Ensure access to critical documents, information systems, equipment, emergency supplies and alternative service providers.
- Recovery procedures: Establish priorities for assessing damage, restoring essential services, verifying that conditions are safe and authorising the resumption of normal operations.

Practical example: Following a fire at a school, all learners and employees are safely evacuated. However, several classrooms are damaged, and the administration building cannot be occupied. Without a contingency plan, the school may be unable to continue teaching, access learner records or communicate effectively with parents. A suitable plan could provide for temporary classrooms, alternative teaching arrangements, secure access to essential records and a structured communication process.

In a manufacturing facility, the same principle applies to damaged production equipment, unavailable utilities, interrupted supply chains and alternative production arrangements.

The OHS Act does not impose a general requirement on every employer to maintain a comprehensive business continuity plan. Such plans are an important risk-management measure and may also be required by sector-specific legislation, contractual obligations or other applicable requirements.

An effective contingency plan must be practical, documented, communicated to relevant personnel, periodically reviewed and tested where appropriate. No activity should resume until the associated hazards have been assessed and suitable safety measures implemented. Effective emergency preparedness is not simply about evacuating everyone as quickly as possible, but about protecting people in the safest reasonably practicable manner according to the nature of the threat. Organisations must prepare for and practice both evacuation and duress responses, recognise changing conditions and address weaknesses before an actual emergency occurs. However, emergency preparedness does not end when the immediate danger has passed. Effective contingency planning is equally important to maintain essential functions, minimise operational disruption and ensure the safe recovery and resumption of activities. A successful emergency response protects lives, while an effective contingency plan ensures organisational resilience and continuity.

How Top Compliance can assist

Top Compliance assists with site-specific emergency and duress planning, evacuation and lockdown procedure reviews, risk assessments, drills, emergency-role training, observations and corrective-action recommendations. The employer remains responsible for implementing and maintaining suitable controls and coordinating with the relevant emergency services.

Legal references and guidance

Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993: sections 8, 9, 13, 14 and 16.
General Safety Regulations, 1986, as amended: regulation 3 (first aid) and regulation 13J (fire precautions and means of egress).
Other applicable requirements may include local authority fire by-laws, building requirements and sector-specific emergency rules.

This newsletter provides general occupational health and safety guidance, not a substitute for a site-specific risk assessment, emergency-services direction or legal advice. Apply the relevant legislation and the requirements of the workplace and local authority.

For more information, please contact us on info@topcompliance.co.za

Yours in Health and Safety

	
Occupational health and safety auditing and consulting	Online safety shop

				
Appointments, checklists and templates	First aid equipment	Signage	Legal posters	Safety Equipment

Courses offered by Top Compliance (Pty) Ltd

ONLINE ACADEMY - https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/		
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	**Online**	**Onsite Excluding travel**
Safety representative – Legal Liability	R980.00	R1300.00
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	R1250.00	R 1730.00
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	R735.00	R875.00
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	R735.00	R875.00
Basic Ladder Safety Course	R735.00	R875.00
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses		
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	R735.00	R875.00
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	R810.00	R950.00
First aid		
Level 1 - US 119567 - Perform basic life support and first aid procedures – THEORY MODULE	R400.00	-

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Occupational Health and Safety Courses
Safety representative – Legal Liability
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638
Basic Ladder Safety Course
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning

ONSITE TRAINING	
First Aid Courses:	
Level 1 - US 119567 - Perform basic life support and first aid procedures	2 days
Level 2 - US 120496 - Provide risk-based primary emergency care/first aid in the workplace	3 days
Level 3 - US 376480 - Provide first aid as an advanced first responder	3 days
Level 1 & 2 - US 119567 & 120496	3 days
Level 1, 2 & 3 - US 119567, 120496 & 376480	5 days
Level 2 & 3 - US 120496 & 376480	3 days
Child and infant CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking and AED	1 day
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	
Safety representative – Legal Liability	1 day
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	1 day
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	1 day
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	6 hours
Basic Ladder Safety	6 hours
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses	
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	6 hours
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	1 day