

Weekly Safety Briefings

Week 31 – Monday, July 27 – Friday, July 31, 2026

Communication During Emergencies

Introduction – Communication During Emergencies: When Words Save Lives

Introduction for Leaders:

Emergencies do not give advance notice. When one happens, the ability to communicate clearly, quickly, and accurately is often the difference between a situation that gets controlled and one that spirals. This week we are talking about emergency communication, not the equipment side, but the human side. What to say, how to say it, who to say it to, and what happens when communication breaks down under pressure.

How to Frame This Week:

- Keep it grounded in your actual emergency procedures. Connect each day's conversation to what your team would realistically do here, not hypothetical scenarios.
- Monday carries the weekly challenge. Revisit it mid-week and use Friday to hear what people noticed when they tested themselves.
- Encourage honest conversation. Most people have never practiced what they would say in an emergency. This week is a low-stakes place to think it through.

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Monday – Your Brain in an Emergency

Discussion:

The first thing to understand about emergency communication is that your brain is not on your side. Under stress, the body floods with adrenaline, vision narrows, skills degrade, and the part of the brain responsible for clear thinking and sequencing gets partially hijacked by the survival response. It's not a weakness. It is biology. And it explains why people who are otherwise excellent communicators can find themselves unable to say a clear sentence in a genuine emergency.

The solution is not willpower. It is practice and preparation. The brain defaults to what it knows. If what it knows is a clear, practiced sequence for communicating during an emergency, that is what will come out under pressure. If it only knows panic, that is what comes out instead.

What stress does to communication:

Information overload. The brain tries to process everything at once and often communicates nothing useful as a result. Trained communicators learn to transmit one piece of information at a time.

Assumption of shared awareness. Under stress, people assume others know what they know. They say "it's over there" instead of "the injured person is at the south end of Line 3."

Volume without clarity. Yelling is not communicating. Loud but vague instructions create confusion rather than action.

Weekly Challenge:

This week, memorize three things: the location of your nearest emergency exit, the number to call for an internal emergency, and the name of the person who takes charge in an emergency on your shift. On Friday, every person will be asked to say all three without looking them up.

Team member engagement:

"Right now, without looking, who on this crew takes charge if an emergency happens? What is the first number you call? Take a guess and we will verify."

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Tuesday – What to Say and How to Say It

Discussion:

Good emergency communication is not about sounding calm. It is about being clear. You can be scared and still communicate effectively if you know what you are trying to say and in what order. The structure matters as much as the words.

The four things every emergency communication needs to include:

What happened? A brief, factual description of the incident. Not a theory, just what you observed. “There is a fire at the base of the east conveyor” or “John has fallen from the mezzanine and is not responsive.”

Where it is. Specific location. Building, floor, zone, equipment name. “Near the entrance” is not useful to someone who does not know the space. “Bay 4, south wall, next to the loading dock” is.

What you need. Be direct about the resources required. “Call 911.” “We need the AED from the main hallway.” “Get the shift supervisor to Building C now.”

Who is telling them? Especially important in radio communication or when calling for help from a large facility. “This is Marcus from the night shift, Line 2” helps responders know who to call back.

A Real-World Example:

A supervisor responds: “Where’s ‘here’?” Another voice cuts in: “Is that a fire or just dust?” The original caller, now trying to get a better look, doesn’t respond right away. Fifteen seconds pass. Someone else asks, “Do we need to pull the alarm?” By the time anyone actually pulls the fire alarm or calls it in, close to two minutes have gone by — and in a fire, two minutes is the difference between a fire extinguisher handling it and a fully involved structure fire. Meanwhile, workers in the adjacent areas have no idea anything is happening, because nothing has gone out over the radio that tells them to move.

Team member engagement:

“If you had to call in a potential fire on this site right now using what you know about this building, what would you actually say? Let’s try it out loud.”

“What is the hardest part of that? Where do you think you would get stuck?”

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Wednesday – The Chain of Communication and Where It Breaks

Discussion:

Where emergency communication commonly breaks down:

The first person assumes someone else has already called. This is one of the most common and deadly communication failures in emergencies. The bystander effect is real: the more people present, the less likely any individual feels personal responsibility to act. In an emergency, someone needs to be specifically designated to call.

Information travels sideways instead of up. The person who knows what happened tells the person next to them, who tells the next person, and so on. By the time it reaches someone with the authority to activate a full response, the story has changed and the delay has cost minutes.

Unclear chain of command creates communication gridlock. When nobody is sure who is in charge, everyone waits for someone else to direct the communication. Decisive early communication requires a designated person whose role is known before the emergency happens.

Confirmation never comes back. A message was sent. Did it land? Was it received? Was it understood? Without confirmation, the sender does not know whether help is coming or whether they need to send again.

The fix for most of these: Point to a specific person and give them a specific job. Not “someone call 911.” “Marcus, you call 911 right now.” Not “can somebody get the supervisor.” “Janelle, go get the supervisor, Building B office, and tell her there is an injury at Line 4.” Specific tasking eliminates the assumption that someone else handled it.

A Real-World example

A worker on a loading dock noticed a coworker had collapsed and was unresponsive. He immediately turned to the group and yelled, “Somebody call 911!” Eight people heard it. Every one of them assumed one of the others was already making the call. Two people pulled out their phones and then put them away when they saw someone else doing the same thing. One person went to find a supervisor. Another went to get water. Thirty seconds passed with no call placed. It was not until a ninth person walked into the area, saw the situation fresh, and said, “Marcus, call 911 right now, tell them we have an unconscious worker at the east loading dock” that the call actually went out. From the moment the worker collapsed to the moment 911 was dialed was nearly two minutes. The worker survived, but paramedics noted on their report that earlier contact would have meaningfully improved the outcome. **The original message was loud. It was heard by everyone. And it reached no one.**

Team member engagement:

“Has anyone been in a situation, at work or anywhere, where an emergency response was slowed down because of a communication gap? What happened and what was the gap?”

“On this crew, who gets notified first in an emergency, and does everyone know that without having to think about it?”

“If you sent someone for help right now, how would you know they actually got there and communicated the right information?”

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Thursday – Staying Useful When Everything Is Loud

Discussion:

Emergencies are loud in more ways than one. There is literal noise from alarms, equipment, and people. There is emotional noise from fear and adrenaline. There is informational noise as everyone tries to speak at once. Staying useful as a communicator in that environment requires knowing in advance what your role is, because you will not have the clarity to figure it out in the moment.

How to stay useful when the situation is chaotic:

Know your role before the emergency. If you are not the person in charge, your job is to support, not to broadcast. Too many voices with competing information creates noise, not clarity. Support the chain of command by communicating through it, not around it.

Use closed-loop communication. When you receive an instruction during an emergency, repeat it back. “You want me to go to the east exit and count heads, correct?” This confirms the instruction was received accurately and gives the sender confirmation it landed. It takes three extra seconds and prevents ten minutes of confusion.

Speak to one person at a time. Broadcasting to a group during an emergency produces competing responses and no clear owner for any task. Address one person, give them one job, get confirmation, then move to the next.

Keep transmissions short. In radio communication or across a noisy space, shorter is more reliable. “Fire at east conveyor, evacuating now, calling 911” is more useful than a forty-second description of what happened.

A Real-World example:

Piper Alpha, North Sea oil platform, July 6, 1988. This is the incident most process safety and EHS training worldwide is built around, and it's thoroughly documented through the official Cullen Inquiry.

After the first explosion destroyed the control room, no evacuation orders were given and there were no platform-wide emergency communications. Workers did exactly what they'd been trained to do — they gathered in the accommodation block, the area furthest from the fire, and waited for instructions that never came. Personnel who followed procedure and stayed in the accommodation area — which was theoretically fire-protected — were killed when the structure ultimately failed and collapsed into the sea.

The root communication failure was structural, not just a bad radio call: the people with the authority to order evacuation had been killed in the first explosion, so there was no one left who could issue the one instruction that mattered — get out by any means necessary. With command and control lost along with electrical power, the emergency response system was, in the words of the inquiry, essentially decapitated. 167 workers died.

Team member engagement:

“What does your role look like in our emergency plan? Do you know it well enough to do it without being told when the alarm goes off?”

“What is your emergency back up plan?”

“What is one thing about how we communicate during normal operations that would actually help us during an emergency, and one thing that might hurt us?”

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Friday – Week Wrap-Up

Discussion:

This week we covered the human side of emergency response, specifically the communication side. We talked about what stress does to the brain and why practice before the emergency is the only thing that reliably works. We broke down the four elements every emergency communication needs to include. We identified where the chain of communication typically breaks down and the specific fix for each failure point. And we talked about how to stay useful and clear when everything around you is loud and chaotic.

Here is the takeaway: emergency communication is a skill, not an instinct. Instinct under acute stress produces yelling, assumption, and paralysis. Skill produces clear information moving quickly to the right people. The gap between those two outcomes is practice, familiarity with your role, and the willingness to think about this stuff before you need it. That is exactly what this week was for.

Weekly Challenge Report-Back:

At the start of this week, the challenge was to memorize three things: your nearest emergency exit, the number to call for an internal emergency, and the name of the person who takes charge on your shift. Let's go around and hear them.

"Without looking, say your nearest emergency exit, the emergency contact number, and the name of the person in charge on your shift. Go."

"How confident did you feel going into today compared to Monday? What did it take to actually commit those things to memory?"

"Did knowing those three things change anything about how you thought about your environment this week?"

Closing questions:

"Based on this week, what is one gap in how this team communicates during emergencies that we should actually address?"

"What is the one thing you will do differently the next time an alarm sounds or someone calls an emergency, based on what we talked about this week?"