

OIL SPILL SPILL TRAINING AND EXERCISES – IS IT QUANTITY AND QUALITY?¹

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ABSTRACT

The good news is that the frequency of oil spills is reducing. Better preparedness and prevention measures, quality systems and the sheer threat of the political and economic damage that may rise have focussed attention on this area.

We should not however allow ourselves to be complacent. A key component of preparedness is the training and exercising of contingency plans. Whilst the regime for the submission of contingency plans is generally well established, training and exercises are poorly regulated.

Some countries regulate the frequency with which training must be carried out, but in most places it is haphazard and generally dependent on local management. In very few places is the currency of training considered as a factor in the competence of those trained. To draw a parallel, is a terminal fire drill limited to once every three years just because we do not have fires, and is the competence of staff assumed or measured in some manner?

This paper will look at the issues behind training and exercises and propose that not only should the frequency be regulated but also question whether the quality, competence and currency of trainers be assessed. The author will also look at different training regimes around the globe to assess their relative merits as a template for others to follow.

DISCUSSION

Background

Adoption of the International Convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Co-operation, 1990 (OPRC Convention) requires signatory countries to establish a national system for responding promptly and effectively to oil pollution incidents which must include a national contingency plan, contingency plans for ships, offshore facilities, ports and oil handling facilities. In addition, parties to the OPRC Convention are also expected to establish a programme of exercises for oil pollution response organisations and training of relevant personnel. In general, the initial focus of most countries has been the development of its own national contingency plan and ensuring that all other parties required to have a plan have indeed got one. Setting criteria for training and exercises has usually lagged behind and only now are any countries beginning to address this.

From the oil industry perspective, the oil companies have long been aware of the need to prepare for oil spill incidents through developing contingency plans, running training programmes and exercising the plan. Whilst each company has developed its own

approach to ensuring it is adequately prepared for an incident, the same underlying principles have been applied by all, namely that a plan is fundamental to preparedness and that, in the absence of an incident, the plan should be tested regularly through a series of realistic exercises. However, in order for the maximum benefit to be obtained from any exercise it is important that the relevant parties have undergone suitable training in advance and that they are familiar with the role they will have in an incident.

The need for training

The need for training is recognised and accepted when a new plan is introduced or major amendments have been made to an existing plan. At that time there is a focus on identifying those personnel who will be involved in an incident and ensuring that they are familiar with the contents of the plan and their specific role. In addition, when a new person takes over a position there is a recognition of the need to train that person in the role they will fill and the appropriate effort is made to ensure that training takes place within a reasonable time frame from the date of appointment.

However, as time passes the desire and enthusiasm to keep training current recedes as other pressures arise. For those people who are not full time responders it is often difficult, both from a cost and time perspective, to justify a regular training programme for an event that occurs infrequently. The numerous mergers and re-organisations which have gone on within the oil industry have given rise to a loss of trained personnel and making the time and funds available to train new personnel can be difficult. In addition, when the oil price falls, the training budget often appears to be one of the places first considered for cost savings as the deferral of a programme can be achieved with limited impact. However a proper training programme should deliver benefits to the organisation in terms of improved skills, better operational performance and, in the case of an oil spill, a better chance of minimising the impact of any incident through familiarisation with the issues involved and knowledge of the actions that should be taken.

For full time responders the issue is somewhat different since their competence and ability to provide expert assistance in the event of a spill must be maintained, either through actual “real life” experiences or through an internal training and exercise programme. Such activities are less affected by external factors however, again in times of falling oil prices, there is significant pressure for fees and rates to be reduced meaning that training and exercise budgets are closely scrutinised for possible savings.

The impact of any reduction in training programmes can be serious. It is recognised that, for most people, a significant proportion of the information delivered during a training course is not retained the first time it is taught which is why trainers are

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sometime accused of being repetitive as they try to counteract this pattern of behaviour. In the absence of incidents during which learning is obviously reinforced, it is important that training is maintained on a regular basis to ensure that knowledge remains current and relevant. It is only too easy to forget or only partially remember critical information when it is not often used which can lead to delays or mistakes, especially when working under pressure as is the case during an incident. Any delay or mistake may seriously impact on the speed of response or incorrectly influence the choice of strategy which can have far reaching consequences for the organisation involved both from a cost and reputational perspective. The issue of currency can be addressed by training providers as well as employers with attendance records “date stamped” to remind the delegate of the need to refresh on a regular basis.

As well as considering the currency of a training programme it is also important to make sure that the competency of those involved, both the person attending the course and the trainer, are assessed. Attendance alone at a training course does not of itself confer a satisfactory level of competence in the delegate. This requires setting objectives for the training course which are clear and supported by the detailed programme together with a means to assess the competency of those attending the course measured against the objectives. In order for delegates to get the best of any training course the trainers should themselves have undergone appropriate training and have been assessed on their competence.

How regulated is training?

There are currently few countries which regulate either the level of training required or the frequency with which it should be carried out. As countries broaden their adherence to the Convention from the initial focus on ensuring contingency plans are in place there is a gradual move towards defining the standards to be met for training and exercises. For example, in the United Kingdom the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and the Department of Trade and Industry both define the level of training required for different levels of staff depending on the role that they will play in an incident, ie management or operational personnel. In addition, refresher training, involving a mix of lecture and table top exercises, is also required on a three yearly basis with the condition that full training must undertaken again in the event that too great a time has elapsed. This is supplemented by defined requirements for exercises covering the type and frequency of exercise to be conducted. Exercise categories include notification, table top, equipment deployment and incident management exercises. These activities test different aspects of the contingency plan and entail different levels of planning and complexity.

Other examples of defined training requirements can be seen in the United States of America (USA), [Australia] and New Zealand only suitably qualified people are allowed to perform certain roles in the event of an incident such as On-Scene or Incident Commanders. In some cases these individuals are appointed by the authorities but they may also be individuals within response

organisations or the oil companies. In addition, in the USA, all responders are required to undertake a specified training programme which includes both classroom teaching and participation in an exercise.

What next?

Since the purpose of undertaking training is to improve competency and better prepare individuals for the role they will fill in the event of an incident the next logical step is to introduce some form of examination to assess this. This will require standards to be set and agreed and a willingness for employers and their employees to dedicate sufficient time to undertake the necessary training to meet them.

Measurement can be achieved through the traditional “examination style” method, by evaluating performance during an exercise or through a combination of both. It can be graded as in traditional educational examinations. The introduction of a full “pass/fail” regime would provide a benchmark by which delegates can be assessed and would assist more countries in introducing requirements for individuals to be qualified when participating in an oil spill.

CONCLUSION

The importance of training cannot be underestimated and proper consideration must be given to the quality and quantity undertaken. Even when time or money is in short supply, training should not be sacrificed since this will inevitably lead to a lowering of standards which will have undesirable consequences in the event of an incident. Refresher training should be undertaken on a regular basis and, taking the lead from those countries which are now mandating this, a three-year cycle appears reasonable. In addition, training courses should measure the competence of delegates, a step which has yet to be taken by any authority. The introduction of a “pass/fail” regime would ensure that personnel operate to a known standard which can then be shared around the world. In the absence of an incident, the success of the training from both the delegate and trainers perspective can be judged by running an exercise which will also have the benefit of ensuring all staff are familiar with the contingency plan and their role within it. Clearly, in the event of an incident, the benefit of regular quality training and exercising will be apparent but if it has not happened then the damage will already have been done—beware!

BIOGRAPHY

Lindsay joined OSRL 8 years ago, initially working on the commercial and financial side before becoming General Manager of the operational base in Southampton, UK in 2001. With the continued success of the Global Alliance with East Asia Response Limited in Singapore, Lindsay is now Commercial Director with responsibility for commercial and financial matters across the Alliance.