

Serious or Fatal Event

Guiding Principles

A serious or fatal event is one of the most challenging crises an organisation can face. Lives have been lost or at least seriously altered. Many different people and interested parties will need to be supported, and emotions may be running high.

The priority is to treat people with care and respect, while also maintaining the position of the organisation, using legal privilege when appropriate. The following guiding principles may help a Health & Safety Leader in the first few hours.

- 1. Clarify roles.** Confirm who is responsible for liaising with the Police, inspectors, family, staff, contractors and other stakeholders. The Health and Safety role typically has responsibility to the authorities and supports or guides managers. Operational leaders should engage with the family and the site team.
- 2. Clarify facts.** Quickly establish the narrative and ensure consistent use across all communications and stakeholders. Avoid speculation, guesses, assumptions or personal opinions. Stick to confirmed facts and communicate only verified information.
- 3. State your priorities.** Your top priority should always be the victim and their family. The second priority is the team and individuals affected by the incident. The third priority is to promote learning from the event.
- 4. Focus on the family.** Senior Leadership should visit the family on the first day. If there's a serious injury, leadership should accompany the family to the hospital. In cases of fatality, wait for Police notification and after an hour or two, request to meet the family. Keep initial contact brief and ensure the family feels supported. Consider immediate expenses to cover, such as travel costs.
- 5. Support the team.** Confirm times for the team to return to the site or meet for a briefing on the facts and next steps. Have Mental Health First Responders or external counsellors available on site for this briefing.

6. Be careful with communications. Keep messaging brief, factual and tight - remember that anything in writing could be shared and become public, which could harm the family or the organisation if not intended. On the first day, only critical messaging should be sent to the CEO and a pre-determined group to ensure quick sharing of information.

7. Do not jump to conclusions. The facts are not always as they seem in the first 24 or 48 hours; do not jump to premature conclusions or admissions. A fully informed and accurate assessment of factors relevant to the event will best assist the authorities and all other stakeholders.

8. You can say “I’m sorry”. This isn’t an admission of liability but a way to acknowledge the difficult situation and the trauma involved. Showing sympathy and regret for the distress experienced is appropriate, especially when the facts are still unclear and will be essential for determining the basis of any further apology.

9. Build a good relationship with the inspectors, Police or other authorities. Record every interaction and accompany inspectors, guiding them around the site. Do not let them wander unescorted, as you should be there to support their inquiries. If they take photographs, do the same. Ask that any requests, such as interviews or for records, be made in writing.

10. Seek legal advice and establish privilege immediately - don’t delay. The first few hours are often critical. If you have an internal legal team, plan how to ensure legal privilege. Coordinate with the legal team to record and scan all documents sent to the regulator. An external legal expert can provide valuable advice that could be crucial later.

11. Protect and collect evidence. Start gathering names of everyone on site at the time and create a stakeholder map. Do not delete or destroy emails, records, CCTV footage or anything else related to the incident.

12. Site closure. If there has been a fatality, the team should not return to work for at least 24 to 48 hours – this respects the investigation and family. Consult with the team on how to return, taking into account cultural practices such as blessings, shift arrangements, and safety. The organisation should compensate the team for the shutdown period, and leadership should communicate this clearly. If the incident is serious, consider whether a shutdown is necessary.

Final Points:

- Remember that you are not alone.
- Reach out to colleagues for collective expertise and support.
- Taking care of yourself during this period is important.
- Talking with a professional can be very beneficial.