

Ease and Do

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Where there is smoke there is...

FIRE! Every manager knows there are fires to tend in the workplace. From smoldering embers to raging infernos they hamper our ability to manage the routine events upon which our operations depend. The world is not a perfect place and we should be proud of our ability to multi-task, to resolve issues and to maintain control whether in crisis or otherwise. But how often have you said (or heard) "I spend too much time putting out fires?" Keep these ideas in mind:

- 1) identify and manage the real fires,
- 2) identify and dispatch the false alarms and
- 3) prevent fires whenever possible.

False Alarms

A false alarm is an event that is neither urgent nor of considerable import, thus it is of little or no concern to the business. Though false alarms can distract us from the things that matter most, that does not mean they can always be ignored either.

We must apply discretion when deciding upon the proper way to dispatch false alarms. For example the ramblings of a chronic



complainer are very time consuming. However, they are not urgent matters and the level of importance is probably suspect as well. However, these ramblings may have a considerable impact upon fellow employees and could result in more serious consequences. On the other hand, an unsubstantiated rumor can effectively be discredited and ignored, without further effort.

Regardless of the origin, it is important to be able to discern the false alarms from the real thing. True fires demand a timely and thorough response; false alarms may require further attention but we know that they are not urgent and so we need to learn to prioritize them so that

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they do not interfere with our ability to manage the important things.

The fact is false alarms do occur therefore we should: 1) learn to identify them, 2) promptly dispatch those which require no further action, 3) if resolution is needed, allocate time only when matters of greater priority will not be compromised, 4) not be discouraged as this is as much a part of life as death and taxes and 5) work diligently to prevent workplace fires whenever possible.

An Ounce of Prevention

An important workplace goal is to prevent fires, whether they are real or false alarms. This effort is the responsibility of all members of the workplace team. It is also a formidable task that we must put in perspective.

Reducing the incidence of fires is an achievable goal, as is the ability to speed our response time

as well as our fire management skills. But out-right prevention? Let's be realistic about this. There are matters that are under our control and some that are not. Out-right prevention is, like perfection, a goal to *strive* for, but it is beyond our grasp. Besides, if we prevented all of the fires, what would become of our crisis management skills?

What we can and should do is make every effort to reduce the incidence of fires and prepare our teams to manage fires

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when they do occur. In an effort to accomplish these goals we should: 1) encourage staff to be vigilant for smoldering fires before they spread, 2) define processes through which fires are managed and ensure that staff are fully aware, 3) provide clear expectations so that all staff are able to take proactive steps to prevent uncontrolled fires from evolving and 4) acknowledge those whose vigilance has paid off and learn from their achievements.