

Local Business



Things Go BOOM

By Stephen Balzac

"The French stayed behind the Imaginary Line, where they were perfectly safe until the Germans decided to cross it." — Richard Armour

Consider some incidents that happened in the recent past to greater Boston businesses:

- A fire forces the evacuation of your building and surrounding buildings.
- A fire destroys your corporate headquarters and the survival of the company is in jeopardy.
- A sudden, intense thunderstorm knocks out power.
- A snowstorm closes roads and makes travel dangerous.
- The CEO has a fatal heart attack.
- A disgruntled employee brings a gun to work and starts shooting.

Some companies tell me these issues are simply not worth worrying about: they are either sufficiently routine, such as a thunderstorm, or highly unlikely, such as the CEO having a fatal heart attack, that they simply do not believe it is a worthwhile investment to prepare for them.

Other businesses tell me it's not a problem, because they have a disaster plan. Like the Maginot Line, most disaster plans are extremely effective so long as they are never actually needed. They serve primarily as a way of making people feel safe; at least it's a step up from the companies that have chosen to do nothing.

If you want your disaster plan to be effective, that requires a bit more of an investment. Properly done, that investment will pay some unexpected dividends.

First, make sure that your disaster plan is communicated to your employees well before a disaster is likely to come up. This may seem obvious, but far too many disaster plans are shelved and not pulled out until the crisis or emergency strikes. At that point, it is too late.

How the disaster plan is communicated says a great deal. Employees will take seriously what management takes seriously. If management treats it as a minor, or major, annoyance, don't expect the employees to pay a great deal of attention. If management demonstrates that the plan is important, then the employees will treat it accordingly. Involving employees in the creation and debugging of the plan is an effective way to get them to take it seriously. People care more about something they were part of creating than something foisted on them, and you will create a better plan when you consult with the people who actually have to carry it out. By making your employees feel more involved, you'll also increase overall motivation.

How the business approaches rehearsing its disaster plan says a lot about how seriously it takes that plan. If you practice at four o'clock on a Friday, it is clearly an afterthought and no one will care. If practice requires people to work extra hours or give up weekends, it is an imposition, and people will resent and resist it. Practice has to be part of the work day, as important as any staff meeting or other activity. Done right, it can be a fun way to break up the day and add a little variety.

Best-selling novelist Terry Pratchett once wrote the problem with emergency preparedness drills is they leave out the emergency. Once people understand the plan and can execute it under stress-free conditions, you need to add stressors. Why? As is well known in martial arts and competitive sports, people will often do just fine in a relaxed practice environment, but be overwhelmed by the rush of adrenaline that comes with a real world situation. Practicing under stress will improve performance under greater stress. That doesn't mean you set the building on fire or give the CEO a heart attack, but it does mean creating conditions that will invoke a realistic feeling of pressure: building a serious game around your disaster plan is a very powerful way to accomplish this. Learning to deal with pressure will also pay for itself when a major deadline approaches.

Finally, you must honestly assess the quality of your team. Stronger teams will be better able to handle a crisis situation than weaker teams. A team which is dependent upon a manager for direction and guidance is going to be less able to respond in an emergency than one that is more self-reliant. Teams whose members claim they never disagree are less likely to respond well than teams where members have learned how to disagree productively. This difference in responsiveness will also manifest in more "routine" disasters such as unexpected software bugs, product defects, or problems with a customer.

Your disaster plan can be an afterthought or something that strengthens your company. If you approach it properly, preparing a good disaster plan will pay dividends in all other aspects of your business.

Stephen Balzac is a professional speaker and the president of 7 Steps Ahead, LLC (www.7stepsahead.com), a consulting firm based in Stow, MA. Contact him at 978-298-5189 or steve@7stepsahead.com.

Club Meetings/Notes

Ayer/Shirley Lions Club - General Meeting at the Nashoba Club Restaurant in Ayer on the 4th Monday each month. Social hour at 6pm/meeting 6:30pm. New members welcome.

Ayer/Shirley/Harvard/Devens Rotary Club meeting at the Bull Run Restaurant, Route 2A, Shirley, MA every Thursday at 6 p.m. For more info contact President Dave Swain at 978-425-4311.

Groton-Pepperell Rotary Club - The Groton-Pepperell Rotary Club meets on Thursdays at 12:15 at the Groton Country Club, Lovers Lane, Groton. Call Martha Campbell @ 978-448-1170.

Nashoba Valley Amateur Radio Club - meet on the third Thursday of each month, excepting July and August, at 7:30 PM at the Pepperell Community Center.

Pepperell VFW Ladies Auxiliary - 3rd Monday of the month at 6:30pm at the home post on Leighton St. Always looking for members, support and new ideas. email durno69@juno.com

Rotary Club of Lunenburg -Townsend - Mondays, except holidays, at the Bootlegger Restaurant, 50 Mass. Ave (route 2A) Lunenburg at 6:15pm. Call Jim Hays at 978-582-7235.

The Rebekah – Middlesex Lodge 176 - 1st and 3rd Tuesday each month at the Grange on Champney Street, Groton, Ma at 6:30 pm. We welcome everyone, you may contact: Natalie MacLeod @ 978-512-9738 or by email at sweetnatty58@hotmail.com

Townsend Lions Club - 1st Tues of the month at the Congregational Church meeting room 6:30p. Dinner meeting the 3rd Tuesday of the month at the Townsend House Restaurant at 6:30 pm. We welcome those interested in joining us.

Twin City Toastmasters: - Twin City Toastmasters meets every Tuesday evening at 7 p.m. at the Ronald M. Ansin Foundation Offices in downtown Leominster, MA. There is no fee for guests and you may attend as many times as you wish. For more info please call club president, Peter at (978) 227-0044.

Since its founding in 1924, Toastmasters International has helped four million men and women develop their public speaking skills and become confident communicators at work, at home, and yes, even at parties. Toastmasters now has approximately 200,000 members and 10,000 clubs in 90 countries. Twin City Toastmasters is one of more than 120 clubs in Massachusetts. www.twincitytoastmasters.com

How to Raise the Next President

Dr. Sally Sacks to Speak at Hazen Memorial Library, November 12

As parents, we often wonder what we can do to motivate our children to do their best, to reach for their goals, to rally when things go wrong. Dr. Sally Sacks, a psychotherapist with more than twenty years of experience, will speak at the Hazen Memorial Library about ways parents can nurture the qualities their children will need to be happy, successful and productive - no matter what path they choose in life. Required listening for all parents, Dr. Sacks will present the audience with strategies to handle the unique challenges of raising a child in these stressful times. Don't miss this introduction towards creating a positive family dynamic.

Please join us for this free event on November 12 at 6:30 p.m. Hazen Memorial Library, 3 Keady Way. Dr. Sacks is sponsored by the Friends of the Hazen Memorial Library.

Preregistration required. Call 978-425-2620 or stop by the front desk to register.