



theUriahgroup

A Food Security Primer: Risk to Recovery

A Six-Part Series

Part 5: Response

Definition: “Response” encompasses the actions taken to contain, control, and reduce the impact of an incident.

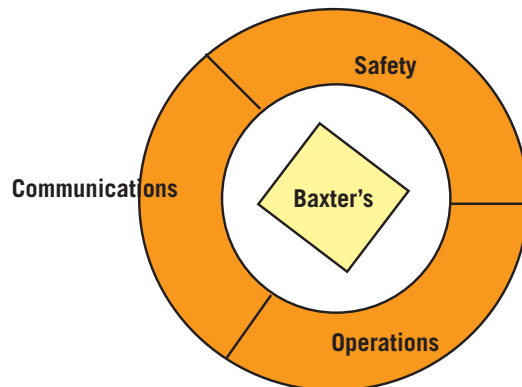
The Incident: Mother's Day 2005

Suddenly, the day turned upside-down for Dave Johnson and Baxter's Family Restaurant. The ramp-up for Mother's Day brunch had been no more hectic than usual with the normal last minute deliveries and hasty preparations. Business had been good through the first few hours of the day. Then, after the second seating, the call from the hospital came in. The desperate father on the other end of the line immediately accused Baxter's and their brunch of making his family ill. He was insistent. His wife and daughter were in intensive care after eating at Baxter's earlier in the day. Dave was taken off-guard by the accusation, but his corporate training kicked in without a second thought. Attempting to calm the caller, Dave began the company basic interview process when the caller hung up. A quick call to corporate food quality manager Jim Thompson was anything but reassuring. Jim revealed that a number of calls had come in that day from Dave's associates in other Baxter's establishments, all with the same accusations. A higher number than usual of Baxter's kitchen workers had also been sent home, too ill to work. Dave remembered sending one of his cooks home earlier in the day with severe abdominal cramps. Corporate was on the case. They would look into the matter and get back to him. Good thing, Dave thought to himself as he headed back to the kitchen, because the high volume business of Mother's Day didn't give him or the store managers time to think about anything but turning tables and making Corporate numbers.

In our Food Security Tabletop Exercises (TTXs), The Uriah Group challenges the participants to manage the incident just described. Other than getting the information from the affected party, there seem to be few standards and even less guidance on how to handle this situation within the business community. Since 9/11, our associates in government emergency management have expended enormous efforts on providing guidance, process and procedures, and training to first responders to equip them to handle the medical impact, but little has been developed for or by industry to assist in responding from a business perspective.

Managing the Incident

We have learned through our TTXs a number of best practices and procedures that can make a difference to the business and its continued operation following a food security incident. We categorize the best practices into three areas: safety, operations, and communications procedures:



1. **Safety:** First and foremost are the demonstrated concerns for the safety of employees and customers. This starts with the awareness training discussed in our earlier article on Prevention, but continues with the real-time evaluation of a situation and the on-site evaluation of the situation by the management team. There are, of course, resources that can be brought to bear to assist teams in making this call, but ultimately, to ensure the safety of employees and customers, the management teams must be empowered to make that call. Risk can be minimized with operational and awareness training, such as provided in our food security TTXs.
2. **Operations:** Keeping the business in operation, generating revenue, making payroll, and paying taxes are critical to all the business stakeholders. With a food security incident, the impact can be catastrophic no matter what response we implement. The objective of a well-thought-out and rehearsed response plan is to minimize that impact and get on the road to recovery as quickly as possible. There are steps the business can take:
 - a. **Documentation.** Each incident-related phonecall, event, or conversation should be documented by the management team as it occurs. Recovery of this information will be critical to enhancing the investigation and returning the business to full operations as quickly as possible. Additionally, documentation will support the business in potential legal procedures as well as the business process enhancements from any lessons learned.
 - b. **Response teams.** It is too late to be throwing your response team together, whether at the store or corporate level, after the incident occurs. Companies that have at the very least established by name an organizational team to respond to unexpected incidents, whether they be food-related or crisis-related, will have a substantially higher probability of being able to respond effectively.
 - c. **Facilities.** In a food security incident you may lose control of your facility or parts of the facility to investigation and/or contamination. Do you have a back-up facility, reefer, or warehouse that is available to provide the interim support for your store? Is there a work-around plan? Can you isolate the suspected product in the store or warehouse?
 - d. **Inventory.** What are you to do with the suspected product? Do you stop the deliveries of all products or just the suspected products? Can you limit the investigation by authorities without interfering with the investigation? Is a recall required and initiated? By whom?

e. **Financials.** Although it will not be clear at this point, you need to start thinking about the financial implications. It is time to contact your insurance agent and bank. Given that you will be out of operation or at least severely limited in your ability to maintain normal operations during the investigation, how will you pay the bills and maintain the payroll?

f. **Investigation support.** Of course it is critical to maintain support for whatever investigation may be initiated as a result of this incident, but it is equally important to stay in control as much as possible to limit the “downtime” that the business is not generating revenue. Building quality relationships with your health department and local law enforcement in advance of an incident can really pay off. Know your government team and work with them.

3. **Communications:** In the heat of battle, with chaos coming from every direction and more than enough immediate actions for the team to address, we can get so involved with responding to the immediacy of the incident that we ignore the one fundamental that holds it all together: communications.

a. **Internal.** It is critical to keep the team informed. Initially, our store manager called Corporate to report the incident, but following that conversation, the prudent manager would turn to his on-site staff to solicit their support and awareness throughout the crisis. Employees are not only important in an effective response, they will also play an equally critical role in the ensuing recovery which will be discussed in our next article. In our model, suppliers are considered part of the family. With an unknown food contaminant, all of your suppliers are not only potential suspects, but also potential sources of information that may provide the clues to resolving the incident quickly. Close relationships and structured quality processes are keys to a smooth response to the crisis with the supplier.

b. **External.** For the most part we can control the recipients of our internal communiqués. Outside the confines of these internal communications, however, we run the risk of damaging the business with every word. The media is the easiest and most efficient method of getting the word out to your customers – and the most dangerous. They are in the business of selling airtime, advertising space, or newspapers. Sensationalizing a story to sell is understandable. Care in dealing with the media requires a professional, not the store manager. Again, relationships established before the incident will greatly support any dealing during the response and the follow-on recovery.

Summary

Our experience with our TTXs conducted in various states and at all segments of the “farm to fork” model have clearly demonstrated an effective response to a food security incident can make the difference in the life or death of the business. Specifically, an effective response can:

- Save lives, jobs, and dollars
- Minimize the damage to facilities and brand name
- Minimize disruption to the business, suppliers, employees, and the community
- Expedite the investigation
- Shorten the time for recovery

In our final article next month, we will discuss the recovery process, which will leverage all of the previous articles to present an effective operating plan for food security. ■

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