

## PRACTICE MANAGEMENT - THE OFFICE EMERGENCY PLAN

By Timothy A. Brown

One of the most difficult realities for any business owner to face is that death and disability can strike without warning. Most want their business to carry on in the event they are unable to run the company. My informal research indicates that business owners rarely leave a set of written instructions for the benefit of their staff in the event of an emergency.

An Emergency Plan is now considered an essential part of the owner's planning. It should dictate a clear set of actions and procedures that are to be followed in a crisis situation. When implemented, these procedures can preserve the ongoing viability of a practice, and may ensure that the business retains its viability, its saleability and the employment of the staff. It is advisable to inform your staff of this plan and when they recognize their value to the practice, and also how they can 'preserve' their employment, practice preservation is likely.

My surveys indicate that most clients will choose to return to a familiar organization for their continued needs. Thus most businesses carry on.

### The Office Emergency Plan

1. The first priority is to secure the practice and maintain the work in progress and appointment schedule. This begins with an immediate search for an interim owner to attend to the clients and to keep the practice running. This initial step will ensure that income will be generated to pay for both overhead and the temporary surveyor. The search for a locum surveyor is an untapped market and now, it can be much easier than in the past. There are many resources available to find locum surveyors, including the classified section of the AOLS website. As well, it would be simple for someone to maintain an email list of locums. A 'temp' can be a huge relief in times of immediate need. Most readers may be familiar with surveyors who have sold their practices – maybe they would consider working as a locum.
2. I recommend that you avoid an agreement with a local competitor to 'cover' for you. This is a common, sincere promise to help a colleague out in a time of need. While they often offer their help, with genuine motivations, they may inadvertently, and innocently lure your clients away once contact has been made. If other practices are nearby, clients may choose to transfer of their own volition, adding to the potential exodus while the disabled owner is recovering or while a new owner is being identified. I also recommend that an experienced practitioner be selected to serve your clients. Younger owners, or owners who have not worked under these circumstances before, often do not have the experience to successfully manage a transition of this sort, leading to serious client retention difficulties. I believe a professional locum, who is experienced in these matters, is the best choice.
3. Clients who have pre-scheduled and upcoming work orders should be notified of the situation as soon as possible. A phone call is all that is necessary. The script could read as follows: "I'm calling to inform you that Mr. X had an accident (or other) and he/she will be away from the office for (mention the time of recovery if known) a period of time." If the owner has passed away, you may begin with: "We are very sad to inform you that Mr. X has passed away." Follow either one of these opening statements with: "We assure you that the office will remain open and your work order(s) will be honoured. We have made arrangements for a qualified surveyor, (locum name), to attend to your file. As in the past, our regular staff (mention names of long-term staff) will continue to be here to assist Mr. (locum name) with your file."
4. Phone calls should be made to clients only once the name of the locum is known. In the first few days, any conversations that lack specific information may unnerve the client and lead to unnecessary rumours.
5. It is not necessary to place a notice in the paper or to send letters to the clients in the early stages. The return date of the owner or the name of the new owner should be known prior to client notifications. While this may be a trying time – it is imperative to secure the business. All staff must be 'coached' to explain the situation carefully when clients contact the business. A telephone call to the high priority clients is usually enough in the short term.
6. The outgoing message on the office voice mail/answering machine should not be changed until all the facts are known. In the case of a sudden death, change the message only when the name of the locum

is known. This eases the client's mind and demonstrates that the practice is organized.

7. In some instances the practice must be put up for sale. At the same time the locum search should be commenced. A buyer may be identified within months (typically an employee or competitor) and the transfer could be over quickly if this plan is followed.
8. The staff can carry on as scheduled (and 'tidy-up') while the locum is being identified.
9. Maintain regular office hours. A reduction in hours may cause valuable staff to seek other opportunities. This also displays a sense of normality, thus adding to the overall objective of keeping the practice viable. There are always a few long overdue projects, such as filing, data base updating, accounts receivable follow up (collections are critical at this time!) that will keep the staff busy.
10. A positive attitude when speaking with clients is essential. Assure them that the practice will continue to care for them even though their regular owner is not available. When communicating with clients, I recommend avoiding negative terminology such as "Mr. X is no longer here" or "Mr. X is very ill." This wording implies great loss and clients will focus on only these words. Use words such as, "Mr. X will be returning soon and in the interim, Mr. (locum name) is a

wonderful person who has the experience to complete the assignment." Show that you have nothing but confidence in the temporary surveyor's abilities and be clear and concise. Long, rambling explanations confuse clients and they may sense a lack of organization and seek another provider.

11. In the event of death, the spouse, lawyer or accountant is typically called upon to manage the business. They should be given a copy of this column and if necessary – you should instruct them to arrange for an appraisal to be performed and the practice should be immediately put up for sale.

If an owner suffers a tragedy, this emergency plan will help to keep the practice viable by preserving the employment of staff, the client's ongoing care and the value of the business.

Think of the emergency plan as the will for your practice.



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