

What Disaster Movies Never Told Us

By Helen Pieron



THE CHARACTERS

- The eager executive who wants to put on a good show for the corporate VIPs
- The contractor who knows something's wrong but can't make the powers that be listen
- The government officials happily stamping waivers and exemptions for the mighty oil enterprise
- The corporate bigwigs who cut corners and dollars so that they might have a better return on the investment
- The icy, blue-eyed CEO with a playfully coiffed hairdo

THE PLOT LINE

Said characters are carrying on with their day-to-day activities ignorant to the looming disaster rapidly heating to boiling point. The climax is obvious; the 'who-what-when saves the day' part is not.

THE REVIEW

This movie plot was missing one key part—the hero. Whatever the reason for the omission, nobody came to save the day, or the ecology of the Gulf of Mexico. It's as though the scenario was never considered and therefore the 'who-what-when saves the day' wasn't either. Real people died leaving behind real families to mourn; real economies lie in tatters; and real wildlife were indeed harmed during the making of this disaster story.



Gulf Oil Spill

What the Construction Industry Should Be Learning From It

While the particulars of the event might seem to apply only to the oil industry, there are many lessons for the construction industry and business in general.

BP may have been in compliance with the rules and regulations regarding off-shore drilling, but being compliant and being safe are two different things. OSHA regulations are the minimum standard to which they should adhere. The goal of a safety program should be compliance *and* keeping workers safe from all possible harm. Companies that practice *loophole* safety (looking for ways to circumvent the rules rather than applying the intent of the rule) are being reckless with their employees' lives.

The Department of the Interior gave the BP Gulf of Mexico operation an exemption from having to conduct a detailed environmental impact analysis before the drilling operation began from the Deepwater Horizon rig. The reported reason for exclusion was that a major oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was "unlikely." What exactly does the term "unlikely" mean? One could make the argument that in 2005, the Texas City Oil Refinery was *unlikely* to explode, killing 15 people and injuring many more. Major oil refinery explosions are comparatively rare, but they happen. An investigation into that explosion found that poor maintenance and cost cutting on man-hours and safety programs significantly contributed to the accident. Without a fundamental change in the company safety culture, past performance will dictate

future results, making more accidents not only possible, but probable.

To put it into perspective, is it reasonable for a construction company with a record devoid of serious injury to be exempt from fall protection requirements? Or is it more realistic to consider that the lack of accidents might make employees complacent about safety, creating the perfect scenario for a serious accident to occur? What about the company that has had several accidents yet refuses to change; ignoring warnings that a profit-driven culture potentially puts lives at risk? Would this company be a candidate for a *categorical exclusion* from the requirements of the law? Apparently the Minerals Management Service (MMS) thought so. The bottom line is that simple compliance with the minimum standards of operation is obviously not enough to protect workers, the public or the company from disaster.

A construction company with a safety record similar to BP's should be hard pressed to secure *any* contracts; but in these times of economic stress, sometimes the lowest bidder slips through the cracks with a less than flawless record. The contractor who awards the lowest bidder, without checking their safety record, runs the risk that accidents will happen on *their* site. The contractor who simply *trusts* that maintenance and safety procedures are being properly followed runs the risk that these programs are ignored or circumvented. And the contractor who ignores the warnings and hazard reports of employees because production might be hampered should be held responsible.

The attitude that safety is an integral element of production must come from the top down in any company. Business owners and executives cannot just look at the bottom line and expect their employees to be interested in everything else. The job-site supervisor is going to concentrate his efforts on what he knows will please his superiors. If that includes only the amount of profit gleaned from the contract, then all other considerations fall by

the wayside. The workers on the site will do what it takes to please the superintendent and secure their jobs; and if that means getting the job done fast, regardless of risk, then that is what will happen.

On the other hand, if the top company executive shows an interest in safety matters for both personnel and the environment, and rewards his staff for good results in safety audits, then the superintendents will strive to meet those standards; and the workers will pay attention to safety standards because the superintendent is enforcing them. The actions and attitude of the lowest paid worker will ultimately reflect the attitude of the business owner.

Then there is the matter of the faulty blow-out preventer. Any emergency action procedure is only as good as the training of personnel, the equipment and the applicability to the individual situation. It seems little is known or documented about the forces applicable to ram-shear equipment at the depth of one mile under water. Some engineers doubt that the blow-out preventer on the Deepwater Horizon rig would have performed adequately even if it had not been modified or left in disrepair. BP initially argued that the oil was theirs but the equipment belonged to Transocean Ltd. However, BP was the decision-making entity on the rig just as a general contractor has authority and decision-making power at a construction site. It was the decision of the BP executive to disregard the warnings from Transocean employees that the pressure readings indicated a problem.

Perhaps the BP employee felt that the company had already had its share of incidents for one decade; problem is that there is no known quota or accurate timetable that predicts disasters. In fact, if there is any rule of thumb, it seems that the moment someone believes that it couldn't happen to them, it will; "Murphy" makes sure of it.

All hazard reports are important in the construction industry. Supervisors and superintendents cannot afford to ignore warnings

that equipment is not functioning within the manufacturer's specifications. They cannot turn a blind eye to tools and machinery that have been modified without approval. To do so puts the lives of employees, subcontractors and at times even the public at risk. Near-miss reports must be investigated. Equipment must be inspected thoroughly and hazards should be easy for employees to report (without the threat of being treated as a whiner or just simply being ignored). Personnel should be trained on emergency procedures and able to take swift, appropriate action before the worst happens. Employees should feel empowered to protect themselves and others through training in hazard recognition, the issuance of appropriate personal protective equipment and a feeling that the company cares about what happens to them. This is for the protection of the company as much as for the employee. Each unsafe act on the part of a worker is a gamble for the company in terms of lives, fines, compensation and law suits. In the event of a serious accident, OSHA could be the least of the financial problems faced by the culpable company.

It would be nice if all disasters happened as they do in the movies. Perhaps someone should arrange for the appearance of a man in a hockey mask or a sinister character with a thick Eastern-European accent. Perhaps the ground should tremble just a little before each accident. At least that way there would be forewarning that the plot is about to take a nasty turn and lives might be forever changed. At least that way someone could quickly pen the hero's part and the day could be saved after all. But, in the end, a disaster story needs no arch-villain, no nefarious scheming, no great, earth-shaking catalyst to make it a reality; it simply takes a profit-motivated culture, inattention to potential hazards, ineffective risk analysis or the "it couldn't happen to us" attitude. That should be warning enough.

Helen Pieron is a safety consultant and Training Director for HP&P Safety, Inc., located in Aurora, Colorado. hpp@hppsafety.com.