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Covid-19: Maintaining Safe Operation

The current Covid-19 pandemic has hit with such speed, that organisations have had very little time to prepare for the huge disruption it has caused. With so many nations across the globe on Government enforced lockdowns, key areas of industry must work hard to ensure food, medical, and pharmaceutical supply chains (amongst others) do not suffer excessive disruption at such a critical time.

However, these industries are operated by human beings, who will be both directly and indirectly affected by the pandemic; movement restrictions, time off due to sickness, adverse impact on mental health / increased stress, the requirement to isolate, and social distancing, will have left many businesses operating with a skeleton crew and disrupted lines of communication. Unfortunately, whilst we may be forced to operate with reduced resources, process hazards do not emulate this, and conversely, the risk of incidents may increase due to the sudden change and lack of preparedness. Moreover, as colleagues juggle this dramatic change in circumstances at work and at home, the way leaders and managers engage, to show that they care, is more important than ever.

Management of change is a cornerstone of process safety; familiarity and deep understanding of a process and its basis of safety is critical. When implementing change, a three-step approach would typically be applied:

1.   Prepare and organise for the change.
2.   Assess the risks presented by the change.
3.   Implement and monitor the change.

With the swift arrival of Covid-19, step 1 has forcibly been skipped; leaving many of us firmly within step 2 and moving swiftly into step 3! What can we do in order to mitigate these risks effectively? How can we ensure that leadership messaging drives the right behaviours specifically with regard to safety?

Increase the Frequency of Operation Review

Recently situations have been changing on a daily basis. Operation may vary dramatically and should be reviewed accordingly! Daily debriefs will go a long way towards ensuring leadership have an accurate picture of the current situation along with emerging patterns leading to unsafe operation can be identified earlier.

Assess and Understand your Limitations

Safe operation for almost all processes requires support from multiple operators and engineers. There will be a resource limit, below which safe operation cannot be maintained. Understanding these limits, taking them seriously and encouraging behaviours that consistently and reliably place safety first is vital.

Along with a reduction of the number of resources likely to be available on plant, consideration should be given to the mental health of those that are present. Safe operation of a plant does not simply require the presence of warm bodies. In times of crisis and rapid / unexpected / undesirable change, different people react in different ways, but there is a strong potential for high levels of distraction and mental health deterioration (in some cases bordering on illogical hysteria). Wellness programs, buddy programs and other interventions should be stepped up to ensure that staff are best placed to focus on the task at hand with other hygiene factors taken care of to avoid distraction.

Keep Communication Channels Open and Accessible

A portion of the technical team may now be working from home. Quite often operators rely on regular communication with these team members and vice versa in order to identify and manage emerging problems. These communications should be open and accessible to all. Consider those who may not be so experienced with online communication and provide them encouragement and support. Furthermore, consideration should be given to those who do not have access to their own personal computer or laptop (many operators); thought should be given on how easy access could be provided for those team members.

Share Information and Expertise

Key tasks undertaken by operators and engineers should be shared as effectively as possible with leadership and team members. Introducing the completion activity logs, weekly plans and debriefs may be a simple way to share information and the status of key activities across the team.

Nominate deputies for safety critical tasks; deputising will improve resilience should a key member of the team become absent. A deputy should make it their business to know their counterparts' activities and plans in detail, allowing for minimal disruption in the event of change.

Continue Risk and Hazard Assessments Remotely

An appropriately designed and prepared remote risk assessment can be at least as effective as a face-to-face risk assessment (more often than not face-to-face assessments are held in meeting rooms away from the plant anyway). Having the right preparation, appropriate resources from all stakeholder groups, good channel of communication for sharing images and documents between participants and good (strong) meeting control can make a remote session highly effective. It is about being creative too. Taking an (ATEX certified) mobile phone around the plant and streaming the images to the team in the assessment can replace the need for a plant tour. Understanding risks and operating with a strong basis of safety is as (if not more) important now than it has ever been. These assessments provide the cornerstones for developing a robust basis of safety and should be continued as far as possible whilst following the spirit of the Government's advice to socially distance and maintain impeccable personal hygiene standards. With today's technology, remote assessments are far more practical than ever before. At a time when we are required to understand unexpected risks presented by change; for safety assessments it should be business as usual!

Business continuity - operational crisis management
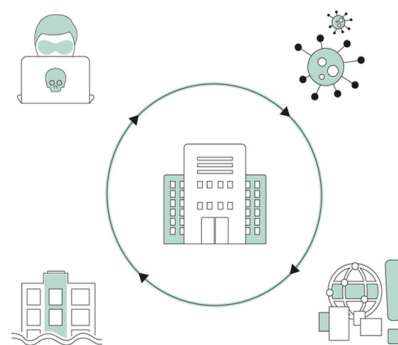
| ⊘ Fast response time | ⊘ Minimization of possible losses |
| ⊘ Continuation of current operations | ⊘ Strengthening customer confidence |

Identify where Essential External Resources will not be Available

In the world of process safety, there are many specialist items of equipment that require specialist servicing, maintenance and repairs (failure to adhere to these schedules adversely impacts the reliability of the equipment). Identify safety critical equipment that requires support from an external resource. Make contact with the external resource as early as possible in order to understand the services that may be provided and develop a contingency plan with their input.

Leadership Messaging – during and beyond COVID-19

During the COVID-19 induced crisis more than ever, leaders will telegraph and embody what is really important to them through what they choose to focus on and ask questions about. Even in the midst of these turbulent times, leaders can work to demonstrate care and create trust – which will directly impact on process safety and safe operation, even beyond COVID-19. Colleagues will be worried about their families, their friends, their livelihoods. This requires empathy and attention. They are adjusting to change at work and in many cases, isolation at home. Now more than ever, line managers who foster connections with their colleagues, practice active listening and show that they care, will emerge with stronger teams.

So what next?

Getting safety right requires everyone's willing participation — and more than their participation, their active and wholehearted engagement – together with an organisational culture which demands the maintenance of a "safety first" agenda. This may be harder today, with enforced changes, fewer colleagues on site or in our offices. However, successfully done, leaders will enable not only widespread and meaningful motivation, they will also create a foundation for unity and performance excellence generally – which will last well beyond a virus that is currently disabling our world.

Social Distancing at the Workplace
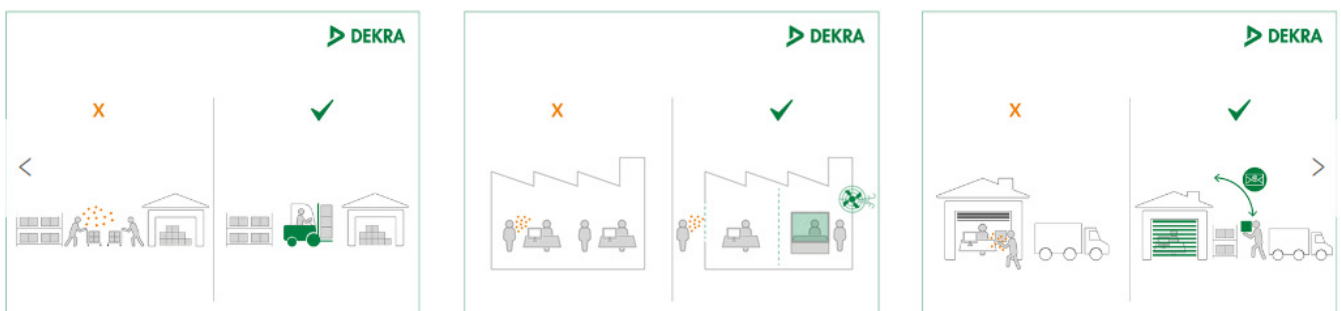
Would you like to get more information?

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DEKRA Process Safety

The breadth and depth of expertise in process safety makes us globally recognised specialists and trusted advisors. We help our clients to understand and evaluate their risks, and work together to develop pragmatic solutions. Our value-adding and practical approach integrates specialist process safety management, engineering and testing. We seek to educate and grow client competence to provide sustainable performance improvement. Partnering with our clients we combine technical expertise with a passion for life preservation, harm reduction and asset protection. As a part of the world's leading expert organisation DEKRA, we are the global partner for a safe world.

Process Safety Management (PSM) Programmes

> Design and creation of relevant PSM Programmes
> Support the implementation, monitoring, and sustainability of PSM Programmes
> Audit existing PSM Programmes, comparing with best practices around the world
> Correct and improve deficient Programmes

Process Safety Information/Data (Laboratory Testing)

> Flammability/combustibility properties of dusts, gases, vapours, mists, and hybrid atmospheres
> Chemical reaction hazards and chemical process optimisation (reaction and adiabatic calorimetry RC1, ARC, VSP, Dewar)
> Thermal instability (DSC, DTA, and powder specific tests)
> Energetic materials, explosives, propellants, pyrotechnics to DOT, UN, etc. protocols
> Regulatory testing: REACH, UN, CLP, ADR, OSHA, DOT
> Electrostatic testing for powders, liquids, process equipment, liners, shoes, FIBCs

Specialist Consulting (Technical/Engineering)

> Dust, gas, and vapour flash fire and explosion hazards
> Electrostatic hazards, problems, and applications
> Reactive chemical, self-heating, and thermal instability hazards
> Hazardous area classification
> Mechanical equipment ignition risk assessment
> Transport & classification of dangerous goods

We have offices throughout North America, Europe, and Asia.

For more information, visit **www.dekra-uk.co.uk/en/process-safety-overview/**

To contact us: **process-safety-uk@dekra.com**

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