COVID19: Considerations Related to Risk

From 1918 to 1920 three waves of the Spanish Flu killed more people within 2 years than both World Wars put together in over 10 years. We are here because our ancestors either avoided the virus or survived it. Back then, medicine was not able to do much more than ease the symptoms and attempt to separate the sick from the well. Since then medicine has significantly changed, but then so too has the virus.

The threat of contagion with COVID-19 presents a hazardous situation to everyone, whether individually or collectively. How high that risk is will depend on who is talking about it and from what situation they come from. Managing COVID-19 is all about managing risk, and that means different things to different people in markedly different situations. The risk our health care workers face every day is greater than the risk faced by most of us. They also take more precautions and require a higher level of support to manage the risk effectively – training, advanced protocols, protective gear, equipment, advanced air filtering systems to name a few. The risk is high, but the benefits to the rest of us, it is argued, outweigh that risk and they continue. Heroes, plain and simple.

Individuals also face risk. And again, each person is in a unique situation, yet not alone in the grand scheme of things. Some old, some young; some live alone, others in multi-family dwellings; some generally healthy, some with health conditions. While the risk of death to a young, healthy single person with good access to medical care does not seem very high, it is not inconsequential. The higher risk is transmission to others which may be catastrophic. The consistent message from the government is to consider all risk: to yourself, your family, your community, the country and the world. It's that big. Sound advice, and the governments around the world are following Risk Management 101: Focus first on the area of highest risk. If the health care system is overwhelmed, the Heroes will not be able to care for the individuals who need their help. If we are not cared for, systems collapse.

Like the governments trying to keep the countries and the world running, companies are trying to keep their operations running. The company, in most societies, is required to ensure the health and safety of their employees while they are at work. And it makes sound financial sense as well: The return on investment for improving health and safety is recompensed many times over in improved efficiencies, employee retention and lower liabilities, to name a few. While the Pandemic is running, companies must adapt to managing the risk of a varied group of people being on their premises - different ages, levels of health and living arrangements - all coming together to fulfill the requirements of their industry, and perhaps the wider communities they serve. To manage risk, the company must know the combination of events that brings hazards and threats together, then put a plan in place to reduce the resultant risk to as low as reasonably practicable. We do that with information and focussing on the area of highest risk – in this case: Transmission.

Risk: A two-sided term:

1) *The degree of probability of someone or something coming to harm.* In the COVID-19 situation, the question is: how likely is it for a person to become infected? This would depend on their individual circumstances - their level of contact with others.

2) *Terms of severity and likelihood of loss, injury, or other adverse or unwelcome circumstance*. To an infected individual, the risk of becoming ill, becoming hospitalized and possibly dying from COVID-19 is also dependant on individual factors. Surviving transmission may be an individual aim, but the global aim is to stop it entirely – focussing on the area of highest risk.

Hazard: *Something with energy that may cause harm.* COVID-19 has energy once it is contracted by a person. It makes us ill. The virus on a surface or in the air, if left alone, will eventually die.

Threat: *Something that releases the energy of the hazard.* A cough or sneeze is the primary threat to another person. The virus on a surface is not a threat unless someone else touches that surface and brings that contamination towards themselves by touching their face.

When a company manages risk, they must identify where the hazards and threats reside, and determine how they may manifest under the circumstances. Minimizing the exposure by having people work from home, if possible, is effective for the company and hopefully too for the employee. Shutting down or reducing operations also manages individual risk which, as a result, manages the greater risk of transmission of the virus. If people comply to the requirements of social distancing and/or self isolation, then not only is individual risk effectively managed, but also the greater risk to society. Recognizing that all of the above has a financial and economic risk, from individuals to the world, its best we do our part to rid ourselves of this risk once and for all.

Sonya Tietjen is the Sr. Project Manager, Safety Systems for Lifeguard Solutions. Sonya has a Master's certification in Project Management from George Washington (USA) and Royal Roads (Canada) Universities and a MSc in Aviation Safety Management from City University London (UK). Working primarily in the high-risk industry of aviation, Sonya has lead the design and implementation of Safety Management Systems for airline and offshore helicopter operations, and provided expertise to the international community.