

VOLUNTEERS MANAGING SAFETY

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Abstract

The paper will explain the NSW State Emergency Service approach to Risk Management, the “Take Time to Take 5” program.

The NSW State Emergency Service is a predominantly volunteer organisation with 10,000 volunteers being supported by less than 200 staff across 250 locations in NSW. Being involved in high risk activities such as Storm and Flood operations, Road Crash Rescue and Vertical Rescue meant a risk management program needed to be developed and implemented that met our varying needs and environments.

The program focuses on providing the knowledge and skills to enable risk management in a dynamic environment such as emergency operations. It is based on the Australian Standard for Risk Management (AS4360). The main aim of the program is to provide a risk management philosophy which is simple and easy to use in operations and training. Tools have been developed to support the program and are easily identifiable as the “Take Time to Take 5” program. The “Take Time to Take 5” program received the NSW Government, Treasury Managed Fund Award for Leading Practice in OHS Risk Management for 2006.

Take 5 has been a successful program because of commitment from the organisation to safety for volunteers and staff, commitment to develop a safety management system for all SES members and the strategic integration of safety into the core business of the service. It works because it is about empowering volunteers to take charge of their own safety, it is not an onerous process to complete during operations and it provides flexibility in a potentially unknown and changeable environment.

Introduction

The State Emergency Service is an emergency and rescue service dedicated to assisting the community. It is made up almost entirely of volunteers, with 228 Units located throughout New South Wales. The Units comprise of more than 10,000 volunteer members, who are easily identified by their distinctive orange overalls. State Headquarters and Regional staff (consisting of approximately 180) provide support to the volunteers.

While our major responsibilities are for flood and storm operations, the SES also provides the majority of general rescue effort in the rural parts of the state. This includes road accident rescue, vertical rescue, bush search and rescue, evidence searches (both metropolitan and rural) and other forms of specialist rescue that may be required due to local threats.

The SES also assists other emergency services when they are performing major operations. These services include the NSW Police Service, the NSW Rural Fire Service, the NSW Fire Brigade and the Ambulance Service of NSW.

As a service we must ensure our most valuable resource, our volunteers are kept safe and healthy.

Background

There is an obvious need in an environment that can be very high risk for volunteers, to ensure there are systems and processes in place to manage safety. Many complexities existed for our organisation

in developing and implementing a risk management framework that would work for us. These included differing views and behaviours regarding safety due to the diversified nature of our volunteers, their work roles outside of SES, the geography within which they work, and a mix of employed and self employed people.

A further complexity was the still ongoing debate as to the legal status of volunteers under the NSW Occupational Health and Safety Act 2000 and the NSW Occupational Health and Safety Regulations 2001. Volunteers are considered “others at a place of work” under Section 8 (2) of the act, however this becomes unclear when there are no “employees” of the organisation present. Legal precedent has not yet determined a clear definition.

The NSW SES was seeking cultural and behavioural change regarding safety so it was logical to apply the principles of the act and regulations across the entire organisation rather than what was deemed legally required. This has assisted in demonstrating a high level of organisational commitment to safety for staff and volunteers and resulted in the development of an OHS management system (currently ongoing).

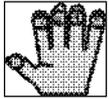
The TAKE 5 program was adapted as a result of the above factors and the need to put in place a system of risk management which would be effective in an operational environment.

The TAKE 5 program

Based on AS4360 Risk Management, the Take 5 program has been developed to deliver the basic skills of risk management with supporting tools that can be used in the field during operations and training. The concept of the program is not new, but has been modified to fit NSW SES and how we work.

It focuses on instilling a behavioural approach to all situations by enabling the person to go through the five key steps on their hand to ensure the risk management process is followed. A number of supporting tools have been developed to assist with the process and are outlined in the following information.





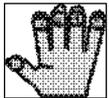
1. **Stop, stand back and observe**

- Does this work present any hazards?
- Have I done this job before?
- What other work is going on around me?
- Should this be discussed with my supervisors or workmates?
- What signs do I need to obey?



2. **Think through the task**

- Is there a chance of producing new hazards?
- Is there a potential to damage any equipment or property?
- Could my surroundings be damaged?
- Could planned actions produce hazards?



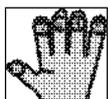
3. **Identify hazards**

- Are there any significant hazards?
- Can I come into contact with such things as electricity, gas, compressed air, noise, heavy objects, falling objects, vehicular, mechanical, high/low temperatures or things under pressure or tension?
- Is the area cluttered, untidy or dirty?
- Are there any obstacles?

Useful ways to identify hazards include:

- having a look;
- thinking in terms of what might hurt you;
- reviewing previous accident reports or injury registers;
- regular housekeeping, inspections or audits;
- asking ‘what if?’. For example:
 - what if the operator on the roof slips?
 - what if that light stand gets knocked over?
- considering the hazards involved in travel, unfamiliar or novel locations, or situations;

- acting on complaints or reports from other SES personnel;
- listening to team members.



4. Assess and control risks

- Do I need to complete a Safe Working Method Statement (SWMS)?
- If so, does it need to be approved before I start work?
- What must I do to protect my workmates and myself?
- What equipment do I need to work safely?
- Is eye protection needed?
- Is hearing protection needed?
- Is respiratory protection needed, e.g. a dust mask?
- Do I need gloves?
- Does everyone understand the controls?

This step utilises the following consequence and likelihood tables as well as the risk matrix based on the Australian Standard AS/NZS 4360:1999 Risk Management.

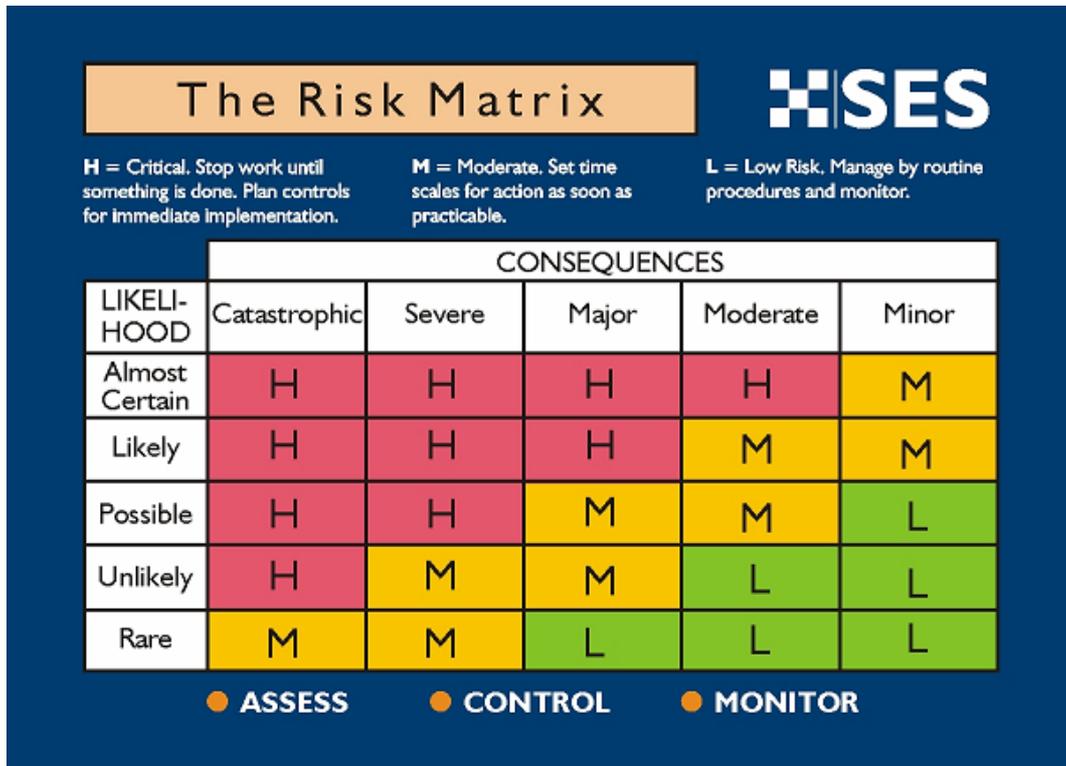
Consequences are defined as:

DESCRIPTOR	DESCRIPTION (PERSONAL RISK)
Minor	No first aid treatment required
Moderate	First aid on the job required
Major	Medical treatment required
Severe	Extensive injuries
Catastrophic	Death

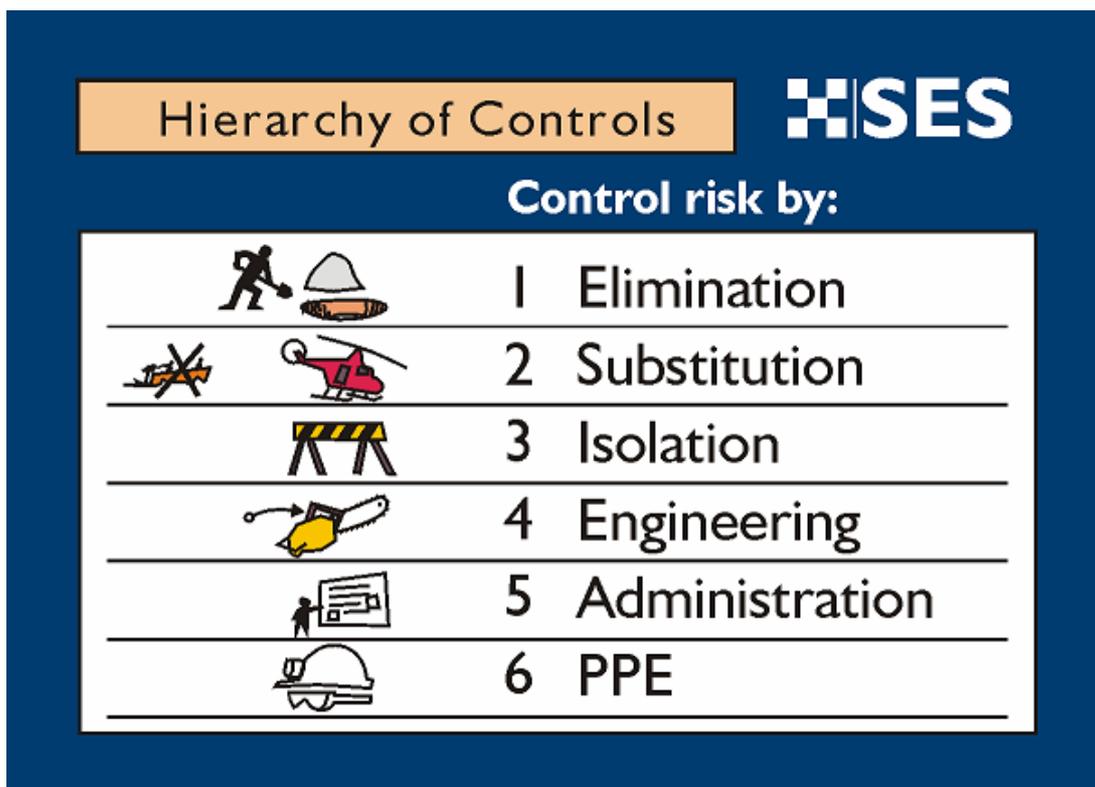
To help you we define likelihood as:

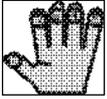
DESCRIPTOR	DESCRIPTION
Almost certain	Expected to occur in most circumstances
Likely	Expected occasionally (more than half the time)
Possible	Might be expected sometime (less than half the time)
Unlikely	Will only occur in unusual circumstances
Rare	Possible, but not expected to occur

This combination of consequence and likelihood creates the risk matrix:



The scene supervisor must eliminate any reasonably foreseeable risk if possible. If this can not be done, they must control the risk to the lowest level possible (The term as low as reasonably practicable is used to describe this level). This means that, wherever it is reasonably practicable to do so, risks must be eliminated or controlled using the **Hierarchy of Controls**.





5. Continually monitor the situation

- Is the risk as low as reasonably practicable?
- Stay alert for changes in the situation.
- Think ahead and eliminate risks before they cause a problem.
- Could changing weather conditions affect safety?
- Is fatigue becoming a factor?
- Are the controls in place still effective?
- Should the SWMS be modified for future use?

The risk management process is circular, and once we have implemented effective controls the next step is to:

- identify hazards (that may have been instigated by the controls used or that were missed in the first place);
- assess the risk associated with them;
- eliminate and control the risk; and then
- monitor what is happening now and review the effect of the controls used.

The monitoring and review phase of risk management is a part of a process of continuous improvement.

Tools have been developed to support the Take 5 program including the following;

- “Take Time to Take 5” poster
- “Take Time to Take 5” video
- Maintain Team Safety Training Resource Kit
- Safety Management Sheet
- Various tools in stickers and magnets formats
- Inserts for team leader wallets

All of the tools are designed to be visually orientated to be simple to use in the field.

Implementation of the Program

The program is implemented in the following ways;

- Maintain Team Safety Training
- Team Leader Training
- Integrated into all Training Resource Kits through use of the TAKE 5 approach
- Continuing promotion and education through posters and safety information.

Why is it working

The program is working primarily because it has been accepted and wanted by volunteers. There is a general understanding of the legal implications and the duty of care which the organisation holds towards our members. For our organisation, risk management has seen the move away from a prescriptive way of working to enable volunteers to produce safer outcomes based on experience and situational requirements. The TAKE 5 program is flexible and can be used in dynamic situations as much as it can be used for planned or static activities.

Where too with TAKE 5

Whilst primarily developed for field work during operations and training, TAKE 5 is now becoming the risk management philosophy at all levels of the service. We are in the process of building onto this dynamic level of risk management with both corporate risk management and activity/site specific risk management. Once the three levels are linked together we will have a comprehensive approach to risk management which will be improved through the Hazard/Near Miss and Accident reporting processes as well as inspections and audits.

Conclusion

NSW State Emergency Service is on the path to ensuring both the organisation and members manage safety effectively. Take 5 has resulted in an increased awareness of safety and its application to the volunteer environment. It has resulted in members pushing for better safety, speaking out about safety issues and sharing information which can reduce risks to other members.

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