

Q:

What are the components of a comprehensive fire extinguisher training program?

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A:

Fire extinguisher and fire safety training are critical components of a comprehensive work safety program. Each fire extinguisher training program should be tailored to the specific realities of a given worksite and adjusted within each organization for different groups of personnel, depending on the threats they face. Still, a complete program should include, at the very least, several common elements covered through both classroom and hands-on instruction:

1. Describe the basic sources of fire and various ways of stopping the combustion process. Fire is a chemical reaction that occurs when fuel, oxygen and an ignition source combine. Fire extinguishers work by removing one or more of these sources, with different extinguishers working in different ways.
2. Describe the types (classes) of fires and the extinguishers that should be used in each situation. Many fire extinguishers are designed for use on specific types of fires. Using a fire extinguisher that does not match the class of fire at hand can actually increase the fire hazard, and endanger both the user and those around him or her.
3. Focus on assessing and measuring fire risks. Because portable fire extinguishers are designed for incipient stage firefighting, employees should be familiar with how to properly assess a fire situation. Considerations used in making a “fight or flight” assessment include the size and location of the fire; levels of heat, smoke or fumes; and the availability of sufficient egress routes.
4. Ensure employees understand how the use of fire extinguishers fits into the overall emergency response protocols for your organization. Many response plans require that the first step in a fire situation is to provide an alert. The familiar PASS technique (pull, aim, squeeze, sweep) of fire extinguisher usage could be modified to APASS – with “alarm” (yelling “fire,”

calling safety personnel or pulling an alarm) as the first true action step.

5. Most important, train employees on the operation of fire extinguishers. Nothing compares to actual practice. Hands-on training is by far the most successful way to familiarize someone with extinguisher usage. Watching a video or providing a classroom demonstration is no substitute for seeing a fire, reaching for an extinguisher, pulling the pin and squeezing the trigger yourself. Most employees who haven't actually used an extinguisher are amazed at how little discharge time one has. A standard 10-pound ABC extinguisher provides just 20 seconds of discharge. Training not only builds confidence, it also breaks down overconfidence. Hands-on training helps employees further assess risk and appreciate the limits of portable extinguishers.

**Editor's Note:** This article represents the independent views of the author and should not be construed as a National Safety Council endorsement.

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