



What is Your Company's Goal with Fire Extinguishers in the Workplace?

The fire extinguisher is a common item that in this day and age is present in most workplace settings in one place. Typically they are prominently displayed and the most recent inspection tag is hanging off of them, showing when they last were looked over by professional eyes, most likely being someone who has come in from the outside once a year who specializes in this type of task. Most people have probably heard about the "PASS" method of putting out a fire at one point or another in a training event on extinguishers. Other than having extinguishers in-place and generally knowing how to use them, what are some of the hard and fast requirements to comply with OSHA law if they are to be used to fight a fire?

Before going too far, a very important question should be asked; namely, are employees expected to be allowed to use the fire extinguishers in the case of a fire or are they instructed to just get themselves out? This is important. If the answer is that they are just supposed to get out, you the employer have two main responsibilities toward them. First, you need to instruct employees that this is the case. And, second, you have to establish an emergency action plan along with a fire prevention plan that teaches employees what they are supposed to do—in other words *how* to safely get themselves out—in the case of a fire. In fact, it may even come as a surprise to some that in the eyes of OSHA, it theoretically is permissible per 1910.157(b)(1) of its Subpart L on Fire Protection that fire extinguishers need not even be present in the workplace if employees know that they are simply to get out when the alarm sounds.

If, on the other hand, extinguishers are present and some or all employees will be allowed to take them into their hands during a fire, additional requirements unfold. Now there are the requirements on having the correct type of extinguisher for the possible fire scenarios. Then, there are the spacing considerations, which are also dependent on extinguisher type. There, too, are requirements for inspection, including monthly visual reviews as well as an annual maintenance check that must be documented. And, finally, there is the training.

Training needs to take place initially and annually for anyone who will be allowed to attempt to put out a fire which has started in the workplace. This instruction needs to inform the designated employees not only of how to use the extinguisher in the case of an emergency, but also of when it makes sense to just put it down and to get out. According to OSHA, "Portable fire extinguishers have two functions: to control or extinguish small or incipient stage fires and to protect evacuation routes that a fire may block directly or indirectly with smoke or burning / smoldering materials." In its "Evacuation Plans eTool: Fight or Flee," OSHA prescribes a risk assessment to be done by the worker in the case that they have decided to put out a fire instead of fleeing. Questions that the worker should ask include,

- Is the fire too big?
- Is the environment too hot or smoky?
- Is the air safe to breathe?
- Is there a safe evacuation path?

Whereas an incipient fire in a trash can may represent a fire that can easily be extinguished, OSHA also describes a situation that will overextend the capabilities and capacity of a fire extinguisher in addition to putting the worker at risk of being trapped,

"The fire involves flammable solvents, has spread over more than 60 square feet, is partially hidden behind a wall or ceiling, or can not be reached from a standing position."



In addition, in regards to the feel of the fire, OSHA lays out further guidance,

“The radiated heat is easily felt on exposed skin making it difficult to approach within 10-15 feet of the fire (or the effective range of the extinguisher). One must crawl on the floor due to heat or smoke. Smoke is quickly filling the room, decreasing visibility.”

While it often does make sense to provide both the equipment and training for workers to attempt to put out a fire, OSHA reminds us that their main goal is for your workers to get out safely, not for the protection of the business physical structure itself. Now is the time to determine what the policy will be for your business.

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