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Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in helping managers lead better in crisis.

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The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

An historical case study

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of March 25, 1911 is largely forgotten now but it is a significant focusing event in the history of industrial safety in the United States. The fire itself was horrible, claiming the lives of 146 workers, mainly immigrant women, making it the fourth highest loss of life in an industrial accident in US history. What occurred after the fire, however, created major changes that still affect us today.

Background

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in 1911 was one of New York's largest garment manufacturers. The company employed some 500 workers in the manufacture of women's shirtwaist blouses. The majority of the workers were women, mainly Italian and Jewish immigrants.

The work was grueling and the pay low. Employees worked nine hours a day during the week and seven hours on Saturday for the modern equivalent of \$3.20 to \$5.50 an hour.

The owners of the factory, known as the "shirtwaist kings" were extremely anti-union and were not interested in improving working conditions. They

had weathered a citywide strike by shirtwaist workers in 1909 and another by cloak makers in 1910 and were one of the few holdouts to voluntary minimum standards for pay and working conditions negotiated by the industry with the unions.

The factory was located on the top three floors of a ten-story building in Greenwich Village. In keeping with the common practice, stairwells and exits were kept locked to keep out union organizers, reduce pilferage of scrap material and prevent workers from taking unauthorized breaks. There were no fire alarms or sprinkler systems and the building had been cited the week before the fire for a lack of fire escapes.

The Fire

Towards the end of the workday on March 25th, a fire was discovered in a scrap bin under a cutter's table on the northeast corner of the 8th floor, the lowest floor of the factory. The fire is thought to have caused by a worker sneaking a cigarette (smoking was prohibited in the factory) and igniting several months' worth of scrap that had accumulated in the bin. The fire rapidly spread to other fabrics at the cutter's station.

A passerby saw the smoke and contacted the fire department. An accountant on the eighth floor tried to contact workers on the tenth floor by telephone but there were no phones or fire alarms on the ninth floor. The workers there had no warning of the fire until it was too late to escape.

Workers fleeing the fire found the one useable staircase blocked by flames. Other exits were locked or opened inward; the foreman with the keys had already fled the building. A single external fire escape soon became overloaded and collapsed with the heat of the flames, killing 20 people. In desperation, workers began jumping from the burning building.

The arrival of the fire department on scene did little to help the situation. The ladders used by the department could not reach beyond the sixth floor and the many bodies made it difficult to reach the building.

The Aftermath

The extreme loss of life, coupled with the fact that most of the victims were young women, roused public sympathy. On April 6, 30,000 New Yorkers marched behind empty hearses to call attention to the loss while hundreds of thousands more looked on. This was followed by multiple public meetings and rallies demanding that the government act.

In response, the New York Governor created the Factory Investigating Commission. The commission was anything but a nod to public opinion. Over the course of two years, the Commission visited over 3,000 factories in 20 industries and heard the testimony of over 500 witnesses.

Their findings were shocking. Aside from the expected fire safety issues of exits and alarms,

the Commission found evidence of illegal child labor and primitive and unsanitary conditions.

As was to be expected, the work of the Commission was strongly opposed by industry groups, particularly garment, canning, bakery, and real estate groups. Fire code reforms were opposed as “cumbersome and costly” and the legislature was warned that labor and sanitation reforms would drive business out of the city and state.

The legislature ignored the doomsayers. It passed a series of bills that mandate many of the things that are considered basic fire safety today, such as mandatory fire drills, unlocked and outward opening exit doors, sprinkler systems, smoking bans, and rules for the storage and disposal of flammable waste.

A second round of bills addressed building codes and safety issues. New codes were enacted requiring fireproof stairwells and fire escapes. Others required that owners provide sanitary facilities and drinking water to employees. Children under 18 could no longer work in dangerous conditions (children as young as five were found working in canneries) and women were only allowed to work 54 hours a week. The laws also provided for enforcement of these new codes and standards.

The Lessons

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire is important because it demonstrated the ability of government to force reform in the private sector. This would eventually lead to New Deal reforms for minimum wages, 40 hour work weeks, child labor bans, and the formation of the National Labor Relations Board. The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire is a sad reminder that sometimes it takes a tragedy to force the government to action. 