Routine training pays off

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At about the same time, Masaaki Kobayashi, Assistant Depot Chief for the Niigata Shinkansen Transportation Depot was at work at the Niigata Station when the quake occurred. He collected information and made preparations on the assumption that the train schedule would be disrupted by the earthquake. By a dedicated phone line he received information from crews about the situation in trains. On that day, employees on their days off work came in to help organize the incoming information and verify the situation.

Then the most shocking news came in: a Shinkansen train might have been derailed. “I heaved a sigh of relief when I heard that this was not a problem to develop stronger foundations,” says Mr. Kobayashi. No one had been hurt, but the crew still had to guide passengers to evacuate from the Shinkansen.

It was pitch black outside due to a power failure, and due to bad conditions, no vehicles could reach them by road, so some people had to walk several kilometers, and others from another train had to climb a 500-step flight of stairs to get out of a tunnel. It was difficult, but with the help of other passengers, they were able to complete the rescue operation without a single injury.

Some sections of the conventional line tracks were also damaged. Efforts to repair the damage were conducted while taking care to avoid secondary disasters.

A Major Lesson: Never Stop Improving Safety

“I’ve been doing maintenance work on Shinkansen tunnels for ten years now. It almost brought me to tears of shock to see the collapsed inner wall of a tunnel after the earthquake because I had been confident of its maintenance condition,” says Hideo Kobayashi, Deputy Manager of the Nagaoaka Depot of the Niigata Civil Engineering Center.

The general thinking used to be that tunnels were resistant to earthquakes, because if the mountain moved, the tunnel would move with it. The collapse of this wall was a big shock not only to JR East but to everyone. It was early in November that the main repair work began: “We worked with the goal of re-opening the line by the end of the year or early the next year.” Driven by the sense of mission to open the route for the many people waiting, JR East Group worked in coordinated fashion day and night. Thanks to the cooperation and supports of many, including members of construction companies, they succeeded in opening the Joetsu Shinkansen route on December 28.

The fact that there were no injuries among passengers and train crews, despite the size of this earthquake, tells us that the seismic upgrades have been effective. In this particular case, although the section of track where the Shinkansen was derailed was outside of what had been identified as the priority regions of the Tokyo metropolitan area and Sendai area, JR East had decided to make seismic upgrades here too, in light of the size of the active fault here. Meanwhile, Japan’s Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport is also investigating to determine the cause of the derailment and what countermeasures are needed for the future, but as a matter of social responsibility as the first company ever to experience a train derailment on a Shinkansen due to an earthquake, JR East is also conducting its own thorough investigation.

“We are in a position to convey this technology to younger employees, and this is one of the lessons I need to pass on to them.”

A New Opportunity: For the Promotion of Tourism

“With this earthquake, we were strongly reminded that the scale intensity seven earthquake. What happened to the situation demanded. I think that it’s in extreme situations that the results of routine training come out.” Besides routine training of two hours per month for all employees, and night-time emergency training once each year, special training sessions are also conducted to respond to events such as the subway fire that happened recently in South Korea. In all of this, the training is made as realistic as possible, pushing the crew to the best of their ability. It is because of routinely conducted training sessions where they can build up their own experience that they were able to respond efficiently to the earthquake.

“With this earthquake, I was convinced that all of our training to date was worth the effort. I think it’s important to record events and continue routine training, so the lessons we learned this time don’t fade with time.”

Masaaki Kobayashi
Assistant Depot Chief
Niigata Shinkansen Transportation Depot

Hideo Kobayashi
Deputy Manager, Nagaoaka Depot
Niigata Civil Engineering Center

Hiroaki Nakamura
Section Chief, Sales Section
J R East Group

People of Niigata have a tradition of saying “I’m all right” and refusing from asking for help in a disaster. But this time, I heard people say “Thank you” to the support people worked together to overcome the difficulties.

In September 2004, the annual comprehensive disaster prevention drill was conducted on the Joetsu Shinkansen Line. About 15,000 employees participated. Only railway personnel as a rule responded to emergencies.

Supporting the local post-quake economic recovery

“Although the actual area that was seriously damaged by the earthquake was fairly limited, Niigata Prefecture as a whole suffered as a result of the image of destruction,” says Hiroyuki Nakamura, Section Chief of the Sales Section, Marketing Division, JR East Branch Office. Even places quite far away from the earthquake-affected area, such as Senami Hot Springs and Sado Island, were inundated with travel cancellations just because they were in the same prefecture of Niigata.

Immediately after the earthquake, he felt strongly that he had to take steps to revive tourism. Preparations were made for the reopening of the Shinkansen line, and JR East was able to launch a marketing campaign starting on December 28th, the first day of renewed operations, and running until the end of March, under the slogan “Gamabata-masuri Niigata” (roughly translated as “Niigata. We’re Going For It!”)

JR East offered special discount tickets and travel products. It also launched a prize reward campaign in the Tokyo area. We arranged special Shinkansen trains from the Tokyo area to a festival in the city of Nagaoka, which had been hard-hit by the earthquake, and to events organized by Kuramoto (Sake brewers) in Niigata Prefecture, and both of them were almost fully booked. Attracting a total of 190,000 people, the Niigata support campaigns surpassed our original target of 180,000 and ended as a success. “JR East covers all regions of eastern Japan, so we are in a position to both send and receive customers. In that sense, I felt that our role in restoring tourism was significant.”

Mr. Nakamura continues, “The earthquake gave us the impetus to classify stronger links in the local community. I’d like to nurture these, and continue with our efforts in the broadest sense to promote tourism and the local economy.” The earthquake was a great misfortune, but they will not allow the lessons of this experience to be forgotten. They will be put to good use in the future. This sense of conviction is the same in all employees, regard- less of their department or position in the company.

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Then the most shocking news came in: a Shinkansen train might have been derailed. “I heaved a sigh of relief when I heard that it was not in my section,” says Mr. Kobayashi. No one had been hurt, but the crew still had to guide passengers to evacuate from the Shinkansen.

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A practice drill was conducted based on an intensity-six earthquake scenario. About 15,000 employees participated. Only three were light injuries, and both of them were almost fully booked. Attracting a total of 190,000 people, the Niigata support campaigns surpassed our original target of 180,000 and ended as a success. “JR East covers all regions of eastern Japan, so we are in a position to both send and receive customers. In that sense, I felt that our role in restoring tourism was significant.”

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“People of Niigata have a tradition of saying ‘I’ll help you’ and offering them help in a disaster. But this time, I’ve heard people say ‘thanks to this campaign, people worked together to overcome the difficulties’.”

July 16, 2005