What are Standard Operation Procedures and how do they relate to diving safety

Standard Operation Procedures, or SOPs, are written documents that explain how to organize or do specific tasks, with the aim of creating a standardized and streamlined process to be followed by all staff members. This way they ensure that all tasks are performed in a consistent manner. Although it may sound as if this is logical to expected to be in place, still many dive centres do not have them. This is why you might note that when diving several times with the same centre, briefings (or other tasks) are performed in different ways.

Typical tasks that require SOPs may include:

- Pre-dive safety briefings
- Head count procedures
- Disinfection procedures
- Administrative procedures
- Maintenance procedures
- Lost diver prevention procedures
- Entry and exit procedures
- Post-dive safety briefings

However, these are actually only few of the SOPs that may be necessary. Herein lies one of the main problems: compiling SOPs is time consuming and hence becomes a typical “I’ll do it when I have time” (as in never) task.

Therefore, many times the information remains in the dive centre owner’s or manager’s head, or staff do things how they see fit and as occurs to them on the day. Management usually informs staff about the way they should perform tasks, but usually without any written procedures. The effectiveness of procedures isn’t the same and doing things inconsistently becomes a standard.

What would be the easiest and best way to inform a new staff member about the procedures in use? How can you assure that they follow these correctly and consistently? It may then require a long and drawn-out process to pass on verbal instructions, important aspects could be missed, and inconsistency then be inevitable.



How do SOPs relate to diving safety?

Where an Emergency Assistance Plan explains how to act in an emergency, an SOP takes into consideration how to avoid emergencies from happening in the first place.

Let’s use an example:

Entry and exit procedures can differ from dive site to dive site. Some dives are from a boat, others from the shore. Sometimes a running propeller presents the risk; sometimes it will be a slippery shore entry location. A SOP provides instructions as to how divers should get into the water while avoiding the risk of hitting the propeller or slipping. The SOP should state that the engine needs to be turned off and the propeller stationary before divers enter the water; or it could describe where/how to enter the water in a such a way that slipping or falling is reduced to the minimum.

The SOP should be clear and not introduce any kind of confusion. Ideally, it should be made after a (safety) assessment of the task, to determine the safest and best way to perform such a task. It’s recommended to have experienced staff members taking part in the development and/or evaluation (incl. testing) of the SOP, as their experience might benefit the efficiency and/or the level of safety. Remember that you cannot learn experience, but you can learn from it. Use the experience of staff members to make things better.

If the SOP is well considered, it will reduce incidents and consequently liability issues. To make it really work effectively some additional things need to be in place:

- Check if additional training or equipment is needed in order to make SOPs work or improve the process.
- Check that the SOP isn’t in conflict with other SOPs and is in accordance with safety standards or any regulations.

- Have a plan to inform staff members of its existence, provide orientation and training, and distribute or make the SOPs available.
- Have staff members sign a document where they acknowledge that are aware of, and will respect the SOPs.
- If a staff member does not respect an SOP, take a corrective action. By not correcting their behavior, this will not only decrease safety, but will increase your liability risk. As you were aware that safety was jeopardized, and had not done anything about it, you add a level of responsibility upon yourself.
- Evaluate the SOPs periodically, especially every time a safety issue was reported: put a date on the SOP as this will help in understanding when the SOP was implemented or last reviewed.
- Inform clients what you expect from them in certain situations
- For certain SOPs it is necessary to use checklists or logs. A checklist for the safety briefing avoids dive guides forgetting to say something. Maintenance or a cylinder filling log will keep track of when maintenance is needed.

Having an SOP is not a guarantee that accidents will not happen, but it will reduce the risk of accidents happening

How to determine where you may need SOPs

There is no "one size fits all" solution and what is needed will differ from dive operation to dive operation. Some SOPs are needed to detail administrative procedures – such as which documents (including indemnity forms) are required to register a client. Other SOPs may be needed to provide guidance as to when and how to deny services based on inadequate fitness-to-dive, or to explain a cancellation policy.

It is not only clients' safety, but also the safety of staff members that need to be considered. Policies and procedures explaining which personal safety protection devices should be used for certain tasks are an absolute requirement.

In order to determine what your actual needs are requires a certain level of awareness. Doing risk assessments will not only help, but are absolutely necessary if one wants to have solid, effective and reliable SOPs.



Where to start?

Many might now think that this is a huge and unsurmountable task and...yes, it could well be. It’s time consuming, but once done you will be impressed with the results.

However, having SOPs is not enough if you really want to increase diving safety. Just as with EAPs, SOPs are a part of something bigger. These are only part of a culture of safety, which a dive centre needs to develop, nurture and maintain in order to become a safer dive operation.

So, where and when does one start? You can start today, by participating in DAN’s Hazard Identification & Risk Assessment (HIRA) programme.

About the Author

Guy Thomas is an expert Diving and First Aid Instructor Trainer and works full-time as Director of Safety Programs at DAN Europe, where he is responsible for the development and implementation of the DAN Europe Safety Initiatives. He also is a member of the Special Rescue Team of the Italian Red Cross and operates as a Helicopter Rescue Swimmer/Diver Medic, onboard a SAR helicopter of the Italian State Police.