

APA Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program

Good Company Newsletter article

“Facilitating Individual and Organizational Resiliency after Workplace Tragedy”

When tragedy strikes an organization all stakeholders immediately look to its leadership for direction. How leaders respond during the first hours of a crisis offers both tremendous opportunity and serious risk for the subsequent outcomes. That positive or negative response will echo throughout the organization's strata, as others take their cue from the charted direction. Employees will go through the crisis with or without leadership. Lead them!

Crises do not leave people or organizations the same. They change them for better or for worse. In retrospect, business leaders will often pinpoint a workplace tragedy as a pivot point for the ongoing productivity of their work teams. Some identify how the incident actually launched a new sense of commitment to the organizational mission, loyalty, team cohesion, and engagement. Others bemoan the event as triggering a collective negative image, increased conflict, and distrust of leadership – “We started skidding downward and just couldn’t stop”.

So how do business leaders facilitate individual and organizational resiliency so that those impacted can return to work and to life?

Ultimately, crises and recovery from them are about people. Whereas technology, infrastructure, logistical issues, etc. must be addressed, it’s about people.

There is no business recovery without people who:

- Are **healthy** enough to return to work and be productive
- Are assured enough of their **safety** to not feel afraid to return to work
- Have had their **trust** in the leadership established so that they desire to return to work
- Have had their **loyalty rewarded** so they remain employees over the short haul and the long haul.

Healthy

Crises typically do not cause psychological illness, but, conceptually, can produce more of an “injury”. Whereas there is a predictable set of emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physical reactions that usually accompany traumatic stress, research indicates that we are an amazingly resilient species. We bounce back! Leaders must convincingly cast the vision of a “new normal” that includes an expectation of recovery. Healthcare professionals unanimously identify how expecting to get better fuels actually getting better. Sensitively communicating an expectation of resiliency rather than pathology makes it more likely to happen. It is important to respond quickly in a way that fosters individual and organizational resiliency. Your company’s Employee Assistance Program can provide Critical Incident Response (CIR) specialists – behavioral health professionals specifically trained in workplace crisis response – to support your leadership efforts.

Safe

Perception is reality – especially when safety is concerned following a tragedy. Leaders do well to immediately implement security, infrastructure, and logistical steps that visibly demonstrate increased safety. Employees also benefit from the psychological safety gained from visible leadership presence that communicates both caring and competence. When employees perceive, correctly or not, that their leaders are minimizing their situation or are helpless to rectify it, they become increasingly panicked and angry.

Trust

Trust of leadership and a desirable corporate culture are also at risk. A dynamic common to work groups following a traumatic incident is increased we/they thinking and blaming of the boss for problems related and unrelated to the incident.

People impacted by trauma predictably tend to:

1. Regress to more basic, primitive impulses and defenses

- The brain is re-circuited toward use of functions focused upon creating an immediate sense of safety. These thought patterns are not necessarily logical as the portions of the brain dealing with advanced abstract thought are “put on hold”.
- Decisions tend to be impulsive, extreme, and based more on emotion than logic.
- Emotional responses are magnified and self-protective.

2. Immediately attempt to make sense of the incident in effort to gain a feeling of control over it

- The belief is that if one can understand the incident, s/he can be safer by preventing it next time.
- When the answer to “why” isn’t available, people will create one!
- The understanding is likely to be reactive and lack objectivity.

3. Isolate from others

- The lack of control experienced in the tragedy leads people to pull away from others in distrust.

Add these factors together and conditions are ripe for hostility and blame with the company’s leadership positioned as the most convenient target. Following tragedy, the allegations of blame need not be accurate to be powerfully destructive!

The ACT crisis communication process is an effective way for leaders to transition employees past this destructive position into healthier, more productive functioning.

Acknowledge & Name the Incident

- Be visible and available. People tend to assume that you have something to hide when you are perceived as absent.
- Have an accurate understanding of the facts and avoid conjecture.
- Demonstrate the courage to use real language that specifically names what occurred.
- Acknowledge that the incident has impacted the team and that individuals will be impacted differently.
- Acknowledge that the incident has an impact on you. Doing so positions leadership as also impacted by the event and can align leaders with other employees; thereby reducing the likelihood of blame.

Communicate Pertinent Information with Both Compassion & Competence

- In these situations, leaders must ‘know their stuff’ in a caring way. Because leaders are also human and impacted by traumatic stress themselves, their communication style often becomes polarized toward either “competence” or “compassion”. Neither position alone engenders a sense of safety for those looking to be led. Employees are scrutinizing closely to assess whether leadership cares and is capable of leading effectively.
- Leaders may benefit from the support of a colleague, attorney, or CIR specialist to help script a response and provide coaching/feedback.

- Have a crisis response plan that includes use of CIR specialists. These experts can help design the response plan and deliver structured clinical interventions to mitigate the effects of trauma.
- Simply exercising this plan automatically communicates compassion and competence.

Transition to a Future Focus & Next Steps

- Triage employees back to work or to additional supportive care.
- Communicate an expectation of recovery. Those impacted must gain a vision of 'survivor' rather than 'victim.'
- Identify security and/or training strategies to prevent similar incidents in the future.
- Communicate flexible and reasonable accommodations as people progress back to 'return-to-work' and 'return-to-life' normalcy.
- Employees should not all be expected to immediately function at full productivity (although some will), but will recover more quickly if assigned concrete tasks.
- Structure and focus are helpful. Extended time away from work often inhibits recovery. 'If you fall off a horse . . . get back on a pony as soon as possible.'
- Lead visibly for several days and be especially accessible to employees for support and information.
- Destigmatize and encourage utilization of the CIR specialist."

Rewarded loyalty

Employees have choices and business leaders wish for their organization to represent the employer of choice. Responding poorly can lead to the costs of employee attrition, litigation, increased workers compensation claims, reputational damage, and diminished morale. Nothing supports employee loyalty more than having their employer really be there for them on the worst day of their life.