

Organizational Recovery

Despite the best plans, traumatic/critical events can and do happen at work. We develop policies and procedures designed to guide us in these occurrences, but we must be equally prepared to deal with the aftermath of such incidents. Management focus must necessarily be on a business resumption plan, however, events such as 9/11 and the hurricanes have taught us about the human side of the workplace and the impact traumatic events can have on our personnel. We know more than ever before some methods management can employ to assist personnel in healing from these events. And we know that management can play a key role in assisting our employees to heal.

Management presence at the worksite

Walk through the workplace. Let your presence be seen. Talk with the staff. One of the biggest factors to helping a workplace heal is for management to demonstrate that they understand the employees have been affected and by communicating that to them. Acknowledgment and expression of this awareness significantly reduces the chance that traumatic responses will persist or become severe.

Let your staff know that you know their work will temporarily be affected. Ask what they need.

Managers need to spend some time with their employees after an event. Employees need to be reassured of management's concern, and they need to be able to ask questions. It matters that "the company cares" about the employee as a person. Senior managers should ensure that immediate supervisors are supported in this role, relieved of unnecessary duties, and not pulled away from this role with work that can be postponed until later.

Be tolerant of a wide range of individual responses among the employees. And still be aware of appropriate and safe behavior at work.

Sharing information with employees

Employees will have many questions and they need answers (often more than once) if they are to resolve the experience for themselves. As more information develops, it is important to continue to provide updates of information to the workforce. Best practice is to communicate that you will provide updated information at routine times during the day, i.e., "I will give updates of information at 3:00 today via email." It is also o.k. to say, "An investigation is underway, and this is the information I can release at this time." Information can be conveyed via email, through notices posted in strategic places in the workplace or through other methods in which employees have been briefed.

Bring in the EAP or other crisis response professionals

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Before an incident ever occurs, be aware of who your contact is to bring in trained crisis response professionals. Typically this will be through the Employee Assistance Program. When an incident occurs, involve the EAP as soon as possible. EAP will generally talk with management about effective strategies to employ in working with the employees. Based on the outcomes of the consultations, EAP will offer services such as defusing/de-escalations, debriefings, or other indicated services.

Support informal debriefings

Provide management led defusings or support formal debriefings, and be aware that this will not end the recovery process. Depending on the event, you may need to provide opportunities for employees to talk informally with one another at future group sessions. The “flocking effect” or the need to talk with others in the same affected group became evident as a basic human need for healing after the events of 9/11.

Support care-giving within workgroups

Keep the work groups together as much as possible, and try to not isolate employees from their normal support groups at work. Structure and consistency at this time is important.

Handle critical sites with care

Initially, the site of the traumatic or violent incident might be secured as a crime scene. Or the office of the person who died suddenly can become a “shrine.” If a violent incident happened in an office/area, it is helpful if employees don’t have to come back to work and face the painful reminders such as smashed or destroyed offices or blood stains. On the other hand, the area should not be “sanitized” as though nothing ever happened. If someone has died, that person’s work area will be a focus of grieving and it needs to be respected as such. Many agencies have announced that the office will be open for those wishing to say their goodbyes until a certain date and then will be closed down and prepared for moving on. The key issue here is communicating that the change will happen and when. Remember, the more information the better. Give a date when the office will no longer be open for viewing as well as a date the position will be advertised to be filled.

Buffer those affected from post-event stressors

Remember the support staff who may be fielding phone calls or visitors to the office that has experienced the event. Those in a position to receive requests for information about the event or calls answering calls for the person who may have died need a “script” of what information management would like to have released. If the event attracts the media, give guidance as to how to handle contacts from the media.

Additionally, provision of assistance with information about work benefits and other administrative

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issues can reduce the burden on victims and families.

Help employees face feared places or activities.

Returning soon, even if briefly, to a feared site can help prevent lasting effects. Going to the site with a friend or loved one or being supported by a close work associate can make the first step much easier.

Remember the healing value of work.

Getting back to work can be reassuring, and the structure, consistency and predictability of the familiar (work) can go a long way to assist in recovery. But the return to work must be managed in a way that conveys appropriate respect for those who have been affected. EAP can assist with this.

The Balance

You the managers are also affected, yet you must still manage. Identify and analyze your own fears and worries.

Control exposure that will reinforce your fear (i.e., continually watching TV) — for you and for the workplace.

Attend separate de-escalations and/or debriefings offered for management.

Continue to consult with the EAP as new questions or concerns develop.