

After a Disaster: Tips for Managers

A natural disaster creates unusual challenges for management. You and your staff may yourselves be suffering from its effects. Emotional stress, physical injury, bereavement, loss of property, and disruption of normal routines may limit the availability and energy of your team. At the same time, the team may face new responsibilities—caring for its own members, and facilitating community recovery.

Plan ahead. You and your work group should be familiar with any disaster plans that affect you, and should have your own plans, however informal, for how you might function in a disaster. Involving employees in planning helps give them a sense of empowerment, and can improve the quality of your plan by assuring that everyone's experience and skills are brought into play.

There is no substitute for a comprehensive disaster plan. However, the following suggestions are general principles that can help you structure your disaster response.

Take care of your own people first.

You need to locate your staff and assure that they and their families have necessary medical care, housing, food, and other necessities before they can be effective in serving the public. This task will be easier if you have planned for it in advance.

Modify office rules and procedures that are counterproductive after a disaster.

Dress codes, rules about children in the office, and restrictions on using telephones for personal business, for example, may need to be temporarily adjusted in the post-disaster period. Consider granting excused absence to employees who need time off to normalize their home and family situations.

Consider expanding telecommuting.

If transportation is disrupted, employees who ordinarily choose not to work from home may find it an excellent interim solution. As part of your disaster planning, you may want to establish emergency plans for key employees who do not normally telecommute.

Work cooperatively with employee unions.

Disaster situations encourage labor-management cooperation, regardless of what the labor relations climate has been in the past. Labor and management share a deep concern for employees' wellbeing and recovery; working together in an informal way can lead to more effective, flexible responses to employee needs.

Take steps to prevent accidents and illness.

Much of the human suffering associated with a disaster happens after the event itself and can be prevented through good management. It is particularly important to prevent the overwork and exhaustion that tend to occur as people throw themselves into disaster-recovery operations, because exhaustion raises the risk of accidents and illness:

- Postdisaster environments are often less safe and sanitary than normal ones, so that people living and

working in them need to exercise special care.

- Exhaustion and lack of sleep can decrease alertness, impair judgment, and make people more vulnerable to accidents.
- People who are exhausted are at increased risk for disease and often forget to take preventive steps such as drinking enough safe water, avoiding contaminated water, and using whatever other precautions are appropriate in the environment.

Prevent overwork and exhaustion.

After an initial crisis period during which overwork may be necessary, develop procedures to assure that employees do not work too many hours without rest. There are several strategies for assuring that people do not exhaust themselves and encouraging them to adopt safe, health promoting behavior:

- Be sure to provide adequate staffing for all new responsibilities created after the disaster, and for traditional responsibilities that become more demanding as a result of it. Prior planning and cross-training can make a big difference.
- Set clear priorities, including identifying work that simply will not be done in the short term.
- Train managers to monitor their subordinates and check for signs of exhaustion.
- Since leaders are especially prone to overwork, monitor fellow leaders and set a positive example for subordinates.
- Take care to assure that no employee has an essential task that no one else knows how to do, or that person will surely be overworked.

Encourage and facilitate healthy, safe behavior.

Do not stop at telling people what to do; make it easy for them to do it:

- Educate employees. Remind them of the importance of getting adequate sleep and rest, drinking enough water, and using whatever precautions are necessary to the environment.
- Be sure there is a convenient supply of safe drinking water, keep it cold if possible, and remind employees to drink water regularly. It's not uncommon to become dehydrated under stress.
- If your building's water supply is unsafe, don't just tell people not to drink it. Physically block water fountains with tape, cardboard, and so forth, and post prominent signs above washbasins.
- If traffic is heavily congested after a disaster, avoid unnecessary travel. When travel is necessary, try to organize carpools with a well-rested driver who knows the area rather than sending each employee off alone.

Provide opportunities for employees to talk about their stressful experiences.

To recover from severe stress, people need to talk about what they have gone through, and to compare their reactions with those of others. Consider the following suggestions:

- Provide a group meeting organized by an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor or other mental health professional.
- Remind employees of procedures for scheduling individual EAP appointments, since employees may need more personal assistance in resolving problems arising from the disaster.
- Help your EAP to be more accessible to employees who do not want to make a formal appointment but would just like to ask a question. Bring the EAP counselor to the areas where employees are actually working.
- Offer opportunities for employees to share their experiences informally, for example, by providing a break area with coffee or other refreshments.

U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM). (1993, December; Revised 2022 [Ed.]). Managing after a disaster (Chapter 6). In *A manager's handbook: Handling traumatic events* (Pub. No. OWR-15). Retrieved December 8, 2022, from <https://www.opm.gov>

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Content ID: 29074