

Addressing Employees' Needs in a Crisis

When a traumatic event occurs in the workplace, employees and often the entire organisation are impacted. This is a special time that requires special management. Through their immediate and supportive actions, managers can significantly contribute to the recovery of individuals directly and indirectly impacted. Here are some examples of steps managers can take in a crisis.

Safety

- Follow all emergency response procedures to ensure the physical safety of employees, customers or other visitors in the workplace.
- Contact emergency services for appropriate local law enforcement, military or fire department personnel.
- Depending upon the nature of the event, help the employees secure or evacuate the building, move to a designated shelter or follow lockdown procedures.
- Take a count of everyone assembled, and determine if anyone is missing. Inform emergency response personnel of any missing employees.
- Communicate in a calm, controlled manner. Reassure employees that they are safe.
- When available, communicate accurate and verified information to emergency response personnel, your manager, employees and others with a need-to-know position.

Triage

- Identify those employees most at risk physically. Give necessary emergency first aid and emotional support. If possible, ask about any history of exhibited physical problems. Provide information to emergency response personnel when they arrive. Enlist other employees to stay with their colleagues at the workplace and, if feasible, at the hospital.
- Contact family members of hurt employees and, in a caring manner, inform them of the event. Offer transportation to the hospital, if needed.

Assessment and Follow-Through

- Identify employees who were directly or indirectly involved, for example, any who were minimally hurt during the event, witnesses or first responders. Talk to them to judge how they were affected. You will likely observe a wide range of reactions: from none to extreme agitation. Explain that everyone's reactions are normal responses to an abnormal event. Calmly give them encouragement and support. If necessary, find a colleague to act as a buddy to someone who continues to cry or remains agitated. Consult with your manager, employee assistance programme (EAP) or other professional resource if you become concerned about an employee's extreme state of mind.
- Communicate with supervisors and team leaders to assist in identifying needs and providing support. Possible acute needs include water and food, a change of clothing, phones to contact loved ones and transportation home.
- Arrange transportation for anyone needing non-acute medical care.

Advocacy

- If needed, request additional support from senior management. You may need coverage from other areas or departments to balance out the disruption in your work team. Let senior management know that normal work productivity will be reduced for a period of time after the event.
- Be flexible in work schedules; for example, extend time to complete projects, and if a funeral or memorial service is held during the workday, encourage employees to attend.
- Consult with the EAP about available services and on-site support. Inform employees if any arrangements are made.
- Foster opportunities for colleagues to support one another.

Communication

- Notify the next of kin in cases of fatal accidental, suicidal or homicidal death.
- Share information as soon as it becomes available. Don't be afraid to say, 'I don't know'. Follow up when you find the answers to those questions.
- Always communicate in a caring and understanding manner. Talking about an incident is one of the ways people recover from a traumatic event. Model that behaviour by sharing your feelings and experience of the incident. However, make sure you have first talked through your experience with someone else. You will want to convey your personal side without losing your composure.
- Help employees feel supported by your presence. Be visible, ask them how they are doing and be a good listener. Don't judge their experience or give them advice about how they should be reacting. If you do, they will shut down and not be forthcoming in the future. Tell them you are extending an open-door policy to them as a result of this crisis. Make sure you can follow through with that promise.
- If you find that your time is limited and you're unable to stay on top of the communication process, appoint an information coordinator. That person can gather pertinent information from law enforcement, family members or other sources; send updates; work with you to share major announcements at meetings and so forth.

Return to Work

- Returning to normal work schedules and routines promotes a sense of normalcy and recovery from the traumatic experience. Help employees remain at work or return to work as soon as they can. Accommodate employee needs or consider temporary adjustments.
- Provide information on the EAP or other sources of support. Explain why these resources can be helpful at times like these.
- Keep in contact with employees who are off work due to the incident. Help them with the transition back to work when they return.

Source

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. (n.d.). *Psychological first aid: How you can support well-being in disaster victims*. Retrieved 18 February 2022 from <https://www.cstsonline.org>

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