Managing the Unexpected: Responding to Workplace Crisis

Learning objectives

- Identify types of workplace crises and reactions employers might see

- Discuss strategic support after a crisis including the value of Critical Incident Response and EAP services for employees, management and the organization

- Learn how to plan for employee return to work after a crisis

- Explore starting the recovery process for employees and the organization

2

Three elements most common in definitions of a workplace crisis

- A threat to the organization

- The element of surprise

- A short decision time

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What makes it a "crisis"?

Examples of threats

- Weather events - tornado, hailstorm

- Workplace violence events - active shooter, bomb threat

- Natural disaster events - hurricane, earthquake

- Personal safety events - virus or other communicable disease

Element of "surprise" or unexpected

- Event not expected to happen or is bigger than anticipated

- Event is more serious than expected

- Not with every crisis

Short decision time

- Little time to make major decisions that will impact future of workplace and employees

- Event demands a plan that must be implemented quickly

- Event comes up so quickly there's no time to think

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Reactions

When unexpected traumatic events happen, daily routines seem insignificant in comparison. The event shakes us, grabs our attention and yet impacts in a very personal, individual way with multiple facets of emotion and reaction.

Physical reactions can include:
- Loss of sleep
- Loss of appetite
- Crying a lot

Emotional include:
- Shock or disbelief
- Heightened anxiety reactions
- Anger and fear

People are individuals and so are their reactions. Reactions are impacted by a person's history of past traumas, current and past health issues (physical and mental) and their own level of resiliency.

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What do the reactions look like?

At work, employers may see their workforce react in many ways…
- Poor performance on tasks
- Inability to concentrate
- Preoccupation with the event
- Inability to stay at the workplace - flashbacks, calling in sick

The reactions often follow the employee home…
- Nightmares of event
- Snapping at family members
- Housework not getting done
- Inability to function and do activities of daily living
- Increase in existing mental health symptoms - anxiety, depression, isolation

The support of management is what will help employees to work through the different reactions as they move towards getting back to business.

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What to do before a crisis event

- Develop a Crisis Management Plan, procedures and protocol.

- Hold trainings for all employees and managers on that plan.

- Consider forming a response team focused on the "human capital" of the organization, immediate and long-term needs.

- Put together a list of resources that are constant and a plan on how to identify resources specifically related to an event.

- Solidify a Crisis Communication Plan that can work for any crisis.

- Test the plan, put together a mock crisis event and role play to see how the plans developed actually work.

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What to do immediately after a crisis event

- Identify in advance who is on your crisis management team - people who know what to do if disaster strikes. Activate your crisis plan.

- Gather all employees into a secured area. Account for all employees on the premises.

- Communicate to all employees about what immediate actions you are taking and what they need to do.

- Conduct an informal "defusing" meeting allowing employees to express any immediate concerns.

- Begin to assess the need for counseling in the next 24-72 hours and arrange for it.

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Additional post-crisis action steps

- **Communicate proactively** by informing staff about the actions you and the organization are taking and what staff should do. Stay visible and communicate often, even if there isn't much news.

- **Remain sensitive** to staff needs and problems. Honor individual perspectives. Encourage them to talk to each other or their manager. Remember to validate that each person will have their own unique way of handling the situation. Be available and present.

- **Contact your EAP program for resources** on how to help staff process and cope with the emotional and physical impacts of a traumatic event by fostering their natural resilience, coping skills and strategies.

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Critical Incident Response (CIR) Services for leaders and the organization

The impact of a crisis event is not just the day of or the day after but the weeks and months afterwards. As many as 50% of people may experience anxiety, depression, and some post-traumatic stress symptoms. (Medscape)

- Critical Incident Response (CIR) services help minimize the long-term effects on staff and the organization.

- CIR counselors assist managers in developing a plan to help employees, keeping in mind the type of event and who it has impacted. The counselor meets ahead of time with management to review and give guidance on what expect and best ways to handle staff reactions now, tomorrow and in the coming weeks.

- The counselors also work with staff to process and cope with the emotional and physical impacts of a traumatic situation or event by fostering their natural resilience, coping skills and strategies.

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Taking care of employees. What the EAP offers

- Tragedy and trauma presents itself in many different ways and each person's reaction is unique. Employees look to management to provide guidance, support, care and compassion.

- Your employee assistance program (EAP) offers a tailored approach in providing support to individuals, managers and the organization to address the human response to a crisis.

- The EAP provides individualized access to telephonic counseling and coaching as well as virtual therapy. Many benefits also offer in-person sessions. The EAP counselor helps employees process feelings, develop a self-care plan and strengthen their coping and resiliency in a confidential and compassionate manner.

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Preparing for return to work after a crisis

Preparing for employee to return to the workplace after a crisis may be impacted by the specifics of what happened, where, when and to whom.

- − Death of a colleague may only impact a team within an organization.
- − Workplace shooting impacts the entire workforce, some people and teams more directly than others but all are concerned.
- − Fire at a workplace can render the workplace to the point where returning to work looks different and takes time, goes in phases.
- − A pandemic such as COVID19 has little precedence to guide employers, and return must be planned but there are so many unknowns and things change daily.

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Returning to work after a crisis

Depending on the severity of the crisis, employees can be very apprehensive about returning to work. They may fear getting in the elevator or going on a certain floor.

Some things to consider as employees begin returning to work:

- Everyone needs to look out for everyone else.

- Remain sensitive to the needs and problems of employees.

- Consider each employee as an individual with their own healing timetable.

- Be visible and persuade all company leaders to do the same.

- Be aware of unusual behavioral trends or problems developing.

- Refer employees who are really struggling to a trained professional immediately (such as the EAP).

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Preparing for return to work after a crisis;
Beginning to promote recovery

- Caring leadership counts. Continue to stay focused on employees.

- Recognize that there is no getting back to "normal". Expect the unexpected in the healing process!

- Communicate often. Let employees know what is going on, steps being taken, and send practical and up-to-date information. Also send inspirational messages – helps to create hope.

- Encourage people to talk and tell their stories.

- Remind employees about resources the company offers to help them cope and build upon their emotional resiliency.

- Let employees and managers know about their EAP benefits and how to access them.

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Moving onward and forward

Healing and recovering takes time. It moves in stages and is a very individualized process. Managers, supervisors and Human Resource professionals are always tapped upon to help their organization and the employees within begin this recovery process.

Here are some tips:

From a workplace perspective...
- Look at what worked, where improvement can be made and adjust policies and procedures as necessary
- Pay attention to feedback from employees, industry and community
- Keep lines of communication open always
- Be open to employee requests and concerns

From a personal perspective...
- Redefine professionalism to fit the situation
- Reach out to your colleagues, talk things over with your manager and find out who can support you within the organization

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Take care of yourself so you can care for others

- Practice stress management

- Be aware of your own feelings

- Accept you can't have all the answers and make everyone happy

- Talk things out

- Do some reality testing

- Maintain a journal

- See mistakes as learning opportunities

- Be tolerant of yourself and those around you

- Breathe!

Good Reading

The ROI on Compassion: Unleashing the Ultimate Performance, Production and Profits with Strategic Caring in Traumatic Times by Lisa Murfield and Loren Murfield available on Amazon

Strategies for Overcoming a Workplace Crisis by Robbie Hartman, CEBS. Retrieved June 8, 2020 from https://blog.ifebp.org/index.php/strategies-workplace-crisis

5 Strengths Every Leader Needs to Get Through a Crisis by Jay Richards in EHS Today. Retrieved June 8 2020 from https://www.ehstoday.com/safety-leadership/article/21130997/5-strengths-every-leader-needs-to-get-through-a-crisis

Why Empathy is Key as Employees Return to Workplaces by Carol Patton in Human Resource Executive. Retrieved June 8, 2020 from https://hrexecutive.com/why-empathy-is-key-as-employees-return-to-workplaces/

Your Employee Assistance Program

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24 hours a day/7 days a week

Thank you!

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