

# Human Resource's Role in Crisis Events

*Terri Howard, Senior Director  
FEI Behavioral Health*

# Human Resource's Role in Crisis Events

The ultimate impact of a crisis, in costs to a company and its people, is determined by how that crisis was addressed before, during and after an actual event. Every individual in an organization will be affected by a crisis in one way or another. That being said, it is essential that an organization remains a place of safety and solace for its most valuable assets: employees. Unfortunately, in the stressful and chaotic environment of a disaster, organizations can overlook the deep impact a crisis can have on the psychological health of its victims. In order to ensure that employees are granted a smooth transition into post-incident life, organizations must recognize the responsibility they have for maintaining the psychological health of their workforce.

Fortunately, organizations already have a resource on hand that is equipped to manage their human capital; the human resources department. Human resources can play a significant role in the context of people support in the event of an organizational crisis. Because human resource professionals are responsible for ensuring the well-being of the employee population, it is particularly important that they are properly trained to assist employees before, during, and after a crisis in the workplace.

## *Before a Crisis*

The first step organizations can take to ensure their human resource department is equipped to assist employees during crisis is to develop an Accounting for People plan. Accounting for People involves identifying what individuals have been impacted by an incident and documenting their current status. The scope of people that can be affected in an event includes all staff, guests, vendors, contractors, visitors, and any other person that may be on site in the event of the incident. Accounting for People allows the organization to receive a status update of every person affected by an incident. The report will specify whether they are injured, hospitalized, unaffected, etc. Accounting for People allows for centralization of information associated with:

- Managers providing a list of missing employees after facility evacuation
- Employees and subcontractors reporting their locations and status
- Families and other parties inquiring about the event and specific employees
- Media inquiring about the event and the company's response

Human resources should work directly with the organization's crisis management team to develop the Accounting for People plan. In order to effectively carry out the plan, it's vital for the human resource department to maintain and keep updated emergency contact information for all employees. In addition, human resources should be involved

with designating a manager to serve as a floor captain in the event of a crisis. The floor caption is responsible for accounting for all of the employees on that particular floor or organizational area of the business site. Each floor caption and the list of employees they are responsible for should also be maintained in human resources' files. The crisis management and human resources teams should also collaborate together to facilitate drills and exercises aimed at testing the Accounting for People plan.

Another step the human resources department can take to prepare for an incident in the workplace is to conduct a talent assessment of employees. The talent assessment should consist of a set of questions surveyed to employees asking what special skills they may possess that can be utilized in the event of a crisis. For instance, these skills could include whether employees have first aid training, a background in law enforcement, psychological training, trauma experience, etc. Human resources should keep and maintain an updated record of the individuals who possess these particular skills in the event they may be needed. This survey should be conducted yearly, or incorporated into employee onboarding protocols.

Human resources should also prepare and keep a list of support resources on hand in the event of a crisis. These support resources should include detailed instructions for contacting the organization's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider. In addition, human resources should contact their EAP for a list of mental health counselors in the area in the event that they may be needed on-site.

### *During a Crisis*

Once a crisis strikes, a top priority of the human resources department should be accounting for employees and maintaining contact with them. One of the most important roles the human resources department plays during a crisis incident is ensuring a continuous line of communication to both internal and external stakeholders of the organization. Human resources should be involved in setting up crisis hotline numbers for employees that communicate important information to them and also allow employees to report their status. These hotline numbers should be established within the company's Accounting for People plan.

It will also be necessary to field requests and inquiries from family, friends and media; a need that grows exponentially with the size of an organization and the number of people affected by the crisis. Families can receive inaccurate and unreliable information from news sources, rumors and social media. The human resources department should be involved in establishing a credible, controlled source outside of the organization by which to notify families and keep them up-to-date. Human resources should include family information hotline numbers in employee handbooks so that employees can share them with their families ahead of time.

Depending on the type of crisis incident that occurs, employees may be prohibited from returning home for a matter of hours or for several days. Employees will likely be worried about their own families and responsibilities as a crisis unfolds such as providing care for their children or elder relatives. The human resources department can play a role in handling family assistance services. Family assistance can extend from the most basic needs—like transporting families out of a crisis zone—to the most complex—like managing specific family medical concerns.

Internally, human resources should be the center of benefit information at the time of a crisis. The human resources team should be responsible for staffing employees for immediate needs that may arise, and scheduling for future staffing needs. In the event that the building infrastructure is damaged, the human resource department should determine what employees can handle operations remotely and work with the IT department to ensure that operations can continue.

### *After a Crisis*

A critical event of any duration or scale will have an extraordinary psychological impact on all those involved. Like ripples in a pond, this impact may travel widely and continue to be felt long after the crisis itself. These lingering psychological effects can manifest themselves in many forms, and if left unaddressed can have a significant impact on an organization's ability to return to productive functioning.

Providing psychological support as a crisis unfolds is essential. It helps people continue to function in the midst of crisis. Psychological first aid goes beyond those directly impacted by the event. Early post-trauma intervention, on an individual or group basis, has proven highly effective in helping individual employees and the overall workplace manage immediate reactions, return to full functioning more quickly, and minimize long-term consequences.

That being said, human resources' main concern in the aftermath of a crisis should be to provide psychological first aid to employees. Human resources should start by distributing written materials to employees that contain information about trauma and 24/7 contact information for EAP counseling services. Next, the human resources team should arrange Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) for employees. CISD helps employees recover from traumatic events by participating in a structured group that is facilitated by an experienced, EAP professional. This exercise provides an opportunity for employees to learn about the psychological and physical impact of trauma, "typical" reactions or symptoms and to share their experiences with others.

The CISD process also provides an opportunity to identify individuals who may need further assistance in recovering from the incident. If necessary, human resources should arrange for a counselor to arrive on-site to provide individual, immediate support for employees who are having a particularly difficult time coping with the impact of the

event. If the counselor believes an individual needs additional support, for the trauma they experienced, human resources should contact their EAP for a long term counseling referral.

The human resources department should also be responsible for deciphering Fitness for Duty of employees. A Fitness for Duty evaluation provides a medical/psychiatric determination as to whether an individual can perform the essential functions of his or her position, without a direct threat to the safety of the employee or others in the workplace. After a crisis, the human resources department should contact their EAP for a referral to a forensically trained psychologist or psychiatrist to conduct the evaluation. This will ensure the most appropriate evaluation, minimize litigious risk, enhance workplace safety, and safeguard the interests of the employer and employee.

In focusing on disengagement and transition back to a non-emergency environment, human resources should be involved in conducting group debriefings and a final exit interview for all personnel on-site or at other involved locations. These debriefings should evaluate all aspects of the organization's crisis response. Personnel should be provided with the opportunity to express any feelings they may have about the process and how well the organization did to cater to their needs.

Based on the debriefings, the human resources team should work with the crisis management team to create a comprehensive after-action report that addresses what improvements should be made to the organization's crisis response plan. Based on the after-action report, human resources can create an after-action plan that outlines how changes will be implemented and also include future training opportunities for employees. The after action plan can also be used in succession planning of employees and talent acquisition to help effectively run the business after the crisis.

### *The FEI Difference*

FEI Behavioral Health's crisis management experts have developed specialized services to address the human side of emergency response through the integration of its mental health expertise, critical incident experience, and state-of-the-art call center and information technology. FEI assists organizations with the human side of business recovery, helps manage the crisis effectively to assure business continuity, and provides meaningful support to victims, victim families and the organization's employees.

FEI's crisis management experts augment an organization's ability to:

- Develop "best practice" plans for responding to the needs of employees and their families.
- Track employee location, status, and contact details.
- Communicate continuity plans, operational information, and organizational needs.

- Immediately respond to employee and family inquiries.
- Compassionately reach out to employees and families and track needs and services.
- Collect, sort and maintain information through use of our exclusive web-based information system.
- Effectively manage employee and family assistance response efforts.
- Mitigate the effects of trauma.

For nearly 35 years FEI Behavioral Health has responded to hundreds of customer's critical incidents and has provided crisis support following work-place violence, natural disasters, aviation accidents, and acts of terrorism. As leader in preparedness, response, and recovery associated with the human dimensions of disaster, FEI integrates behavioral health expertise, crisis management experience, and technology to offer specialized crisis management services to address the human aspects of crisis management.

*FEI partners with you to protect and enhance your workforce effectiveness and organizational resiliency. We offer flexible solutions for the full spectrum of your workforce resilience goals, from EAP and wellness to crisis preparedness and management. We leverage our proven resources, compassionate experts and robust network to improve your employees' focus, empower your managers and prepare you to handle the unthinkable crisis, so that you can maintain a healthy, resilient organization.*