

Recovering From a Disaster

By **VIVIAN MARINELLI, Psy. D.**

The impact of a crisis or disaster can shake your workforce. Even if your organization has prepared ahead of time, a real-life experience can be traumatic and life-altering. The stress can take a significant toll on employee morale, health, and productivity. It is vital to include a blueprint on how to recover in your disaster plan in order for your organization to return to regular operations.

Psychological First-Aid

In order to ensure that your employees are granted a smooth transition into post-incident life, you must recognize the responsibility you have for maintaining the psychological health of your workforce. Your human resources department can play a significant role in the context of support in the event of an organizational crisis.

Human resources' main concern in the aftermath of a crisis should be to provide psychological first aid to employees. Start by distributing written materials to employees that contain information about trauma and 24/7 contact information for Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counseling services.

Next, follow up with staff to assess if additional support might be needed. One type of support is a critical incident stress debriefing (CISD). CISD assists employees in the recovery process from traumatic events by providing support and information in a structured group that is facilitated by an experienced EAP professional.

Addressing the core issues of trauma is a key dynamic before, during, and after a crisis. At the heart of a Trauma-Informed

approach is an understanding that a person who is in the midst of a traumatic event, or a person who has experienced trauma chronically, may not have access to all of the higher-level brain functions they normally might. This understanding allows you to recognize that crisis situations require the management of the behaviors of those involved in a much different manner than if those stresses are not present.

It is important for your organization to increase the understanding of trauma and the impact it has on an individual's overall social well-being health, mentally and physically. Your preparedness plans and response can't stop when the crisis is over; they must continue to address the long-term effects on your organization's employees, customers, and community.

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.

Fitness for Duty

A fitness for duty (FFD) evaluation provides a medical/psychiatric determination as to whether an individual can perform the essential functions of his or her position. Typically, a FFD evaluation is requested when supervisors are concerned about the impact of the trauma on

employees who are involved in safety-sensitive areas. After a crisis, your 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 your organization and the 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 your organization's crisis response.

Communication

Keeping the media and the general public informed of the crisis and the organization's response is crucial during the event. Once a crisis strikes, your top priority should be accounting for employees and visitors and maintaining contact with them. One of the best ways to accomplish these tasks is to make certain a continuous line of communication is available to both internal and external stakeholders of your organization.

A crisis hotline number for employees communicates important information to them and allows them to report their status. Requests and inquiries from family, friends, and media grow exponentially with the size of an organization and the number of people affected by the crisis. Families often receive inaccurate and unreliable information from news sources, rumors, and social media. Establishing a credible, controlled source outside of the organization – like a call center – is a good way to notify families and keep them up-to-date.

Continuity

Transparency of your recovery plan after a crisis or disaster is important for your organization to keep not only the trust of your employees but also that of your stakeholders and the community. By continuing to provide updates through media outlets as well as your company

Website, you will show your commitment to the response and everyone involved and keep the rumor mill from spreading. This communication should include information specific to your organization returning to regular everyday operations as well.

A critical incident may require the attention of your crisis response team for a matter of hours or for several days. Depending on the type of crisis, employees will likely be worried about their own

families and responsibilities as events unfold. Family assistance can extend from the most basic needs – like transporting families out of a crisis zone – to the most complex – such as managing specific family medical concerns.

Your human resources team is 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, you should determine which employees can

handle operations remotely and work with the IT department to ensure that operations can continue.

After-Action Review

The end of an incident does not signal the end of its impact or the end of your need to address its effects. Smart crisis management will use the aftermath of an incident as an opportunity to evaluate the crisis response and the crisis plan.

This is the time to create a comprehensive after-action report addressing the improvements needed for your organization's crisis response plan. Based on the after-action report, your crisis planning team can create an after-action plan outlining how changes will be implemented and also include future training opportunities for employees. The after-action plan also can be used in succession planning of employees and talent acquisition to help effectively run the business after the crisis.

This phase might include interviews, discussion, focus groups, or surveys. Based on feedback, it is important to revise and make improvements where needed. Risk assessment and crisis plans are not one-time events. To remain relevant and effective, your plans and preparedness must continue to evolve with changing circumstances at your organization and in your community.

An in-depth, well-prepared disaster plan can help your organization be ready for the unexpected. Exercises and drills are essential to ensure the plan will be effective and efficient during the event. However, trainings and exercises are never the same as actually going through the event itself.

This is why it is imperative to have an outline of how to recover from a crisis or disaster to help your organization maintain continuity of operations. Providing support to employees and their families, building trust within the community, and reviewing your plan post-incident are all necessary.

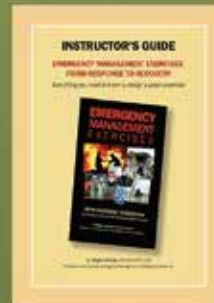


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