The Role of Training in Your Disaster Preparedness Plan

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By Ralph Metzner  |  May 01, 2015

Disaster. The word conjures concerns about school shootings, hurricanes, earthquakes, and terrorism threats. What many organizations fail to keep in mind, however, is how to fully prepare for all aspects of these or similar disasters.

Developing an effective disaster or crisis response program will benefit any organization, whether it be a hospital, school, or a manufacturing warehouse. They all need a plan in the event of a disaster or crisis. It may sound like a daunting task, especially if you are starting from scratch, but once the plan is in place, you'll have peace of mind knowing you’re working from a written process in case a disaster strikes.

What If We Don’t Have a Plan: Getting Started

When beginning a disaster or crisis plan, there are a few things you can do to immediately increase your level of preparedness and reduce the risk of your plan's failing:

- Identify any hazards or disasters particular to your industry or location.
- Conduct a risk assessment to prioritize the likelihood of various scenarios.
- Review any existing emergency plans to incorporate what’s worked in the past (or for other organizations).
- Align an internal crisis team and a set of standard procedures.

The plan should be considered a living document, reviewed and updated on a regular basis as the emergency team sees fit. Once the plan is operational, it will provide specific information and guidance to occupational staff. While managing a real-world disaster or crisis will remain challenging, the ability of staff to protect the
health, safety, and welfare of others on site will be enhanced. As a result, the resiliency of the organization also will improve.

What If We Already Have a Plan: Going to the Next Level
Your organization has an existing plan in place? Great! Now, you may want to take the next step by conducting drills and introducing more in-depth crisis training for your staff. *Relational* training can help on the front end of potential crises by recognizing, responding to, and minimizing confrontational threats—ideally, in a non-physical way. *Trauma informed training* builds your staff’s understanding of the psychological or long-term effects in the aftermath of a crisis. The best training blends insights in both these areas.

- **Relational training**

  Relationships are the context in which work is done in almost every human service setting. When there is a feeling of safety in these relationships, it frees people up to perform the task at hand. When there’s not, the situation can turn volatile. If your organization interacts with customers or clients on a daily basis who may become uncooperative, this type of training should be part of your disaster preparedness approach.

  Training your staff with a system of gradual and graded alternatives for de-escalating and managing people will help them recognize the early warning signs of potentially violent behavior and intervene proactively through de-escalation techniques and positive behavior supports. It also teaches those leaders how to train others in the workforce.

  The most vital step in any crisis communication training is having the right attitude and philosophy. The goal is to stress the importance of de-escalation while maintaining dignity and respect for all parties involved in the confrontation. If your staffers can manage and control themselves under pressure, they can better communicate with customers or clients during emerging crises.

  Organizations have a responsibility to be prepared to act on behalf of those in their care and those they employ. Introducing a workplace violence prevention program that integrates crisis management, behavioral health, and technological expertise is critical when responding to incidents.

- **Trauma informed services**

  Addressing the core issues of trauma often is a key dynamic before, during, and after a crisis. But fostering the knowledge and understanding to do that successfully requires organizations to create a culture and system of trauma informed care. That means frontline staff should familiarize themselves with various types of trauma and
how they impact the individual, whether it be the instigator of a workplace situation or the victim of a natural disaster aftermath.

*Acute episodic trauma* includes events such as hurricanes, fires, floods, and car accidents. While the physical impact of these events, both on human beings and their environments, is the most obvious effect, the psychological impact can have far-reaching consequences and should be considered when equipping staff to deal with the aftermath of such events.

*Observer violence* is the term used to describe what happens when people see harm being done to others. This can happen when bystanders witness a violent situation such as a workplace shooting or robbery, but it also can happen as a reaction to your own disaster *response*. Situations like this serve as powerful reminders that sometimes the interventions we use to keep people safe can, in fact, re-traumatize individuals.

At the heart of the 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 us to understand that crisis situations may require that we manage behaviors of those involved in a much different manner than we might when those stresses are not present.

Trauma informed training gives your staff greater insight into managing a crisis without creating a ripple of potentially negative repercussions. It is important for organizations 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.

Going back to the beginning, your first step is to create a basic disaster or crisis plan. Once it's in place and your crisis response team is formed, you can start to look at incorporating more individualized training. It’s important to remember that any plan will change as your organization evolves. So expect to add and remove things as you move forward. But ignoring the issue and not developing a plan at all would be a disaster in itself.

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**About the Author**

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