



Leadership in the Wake of Traumatic Events

Many people in our workforce can be suddenly and deeply impacted by a tragic workplace or community events. Leaders play critical roles in the recovery of the workplace. Leaders identify the way forward, and are often the first to hear and understand the emotions and needs of their workforce.

Understanding how people react to tragic events and the roles leaders have in recovery is critical to effective responses. In the aftermath of traumatic events, employees want and need to hear guidance from leadership. During this acute phase, leaders must communicate effectively with people who have questions, seek reassurance, and want to take action. As shock and horror turn to sadness and mourning, leaders are in a position to help their employees move forward and to identify when outside support may be helpful.

Understanding Traumatic Grief

People vary in their reactions to experiencing or learning about traumatic events. Most will do fine over time, while for some the immediate reactions can last longer than normal and interfere with their return to their usual work routines. In the short term, many people experience transient, but powerful symptoms. They can include:

- Waves of sadness and stress
- Intrusive images of the traumatic event and memories of previous losses
- Withdrawal from co-workers, and close relationships with family and friends
- Avoidance of activities that are reminders of the event
- For some people, their reaction can be delayed. For others, grief or stress may not ever be evident.

Leaders are positioned to be important role models by acknowledging their feelings or reactions, communicating hope, identifying facts, managing rumors and providing support to others as needs change over time.

Immediate Responses

- Be visible — make public announcements and appearances. By providing useful and accurate information, leaders can re-establish a sense of safety and enhance the workplace's trust in leadership.
- Provide accurate, timely information on what is known, what is not known, and when more information will be communicated. Press briefings, use of social media, and workplace meetings can reassure employees and dispel rumors. Always say when more information will be available.

- Understand that people process information differently in high stress situations - keep messages as simple as possible, repeat frequently, and emphasize positive messages (people tend to focus on negative information when stressed).
- Use multiple channels of communication - people seek information from multiple sources (intranets, all-user emails, staff meetings, and walk arounds) depending on the culture and history of a workplace.
- Speak calmly and encourage working together - leaders promote calmness, empathy, optimism, a can-do attitude, and collective healing and recovery.
- **Don't worry alone. Use the resources available to you. The EAP is here to help you and your workgroup heal and recover. Don't hesitate to contact the EAP at 1-850-644-2288.**

Moving Ahead

- Know the status of existing and available resources - monitor emerging needs, and support fellow workplace leaders.
- Organize memorial services and sites recognizing the diversity within the workplace - respect the desires and needs for families who have sustained losses and tragedies. The timing of services is important.
- Attending memorials is important - tears and grieving in public by leaders gives "permission" to others to express grief and humanizes unthinkable tragedies.

Recovery

- Provide common goals for future direction - redirect energy into needed recovery projects and respectful remembering and rebuilding efforts.
- Avoid blaming - blame directed towards groups or individuals leads to stigma, anger, and desire for retribution. Redirect energy to providing support and future needs.

Growing

- Encourage resuming normal workplace activities, but understand and be supportive if the recovery is slow.
- Recovery takes time, is not linear, and is influenced by unpredictable future events.
- Workplace rituals provide an opportunity for individuals to heal and reflect on their experience in their own style. These create cohesiveness and can cross racial, cultural, and socioeconomic divides.
- Beware of identifying a 'we' and 'they.'
- Focus on future goals - reorient the workplace to future objectives, enhanced preparedness, and "we can do it."

- Acknowledge those from within and outside the workplace who want to and do help; establish a climate of healing and workplace support.
- Expect workplace disappointment and anger after the initial sense of togetherness. Help the workplace understand the changing trajectory of recovery.
- Take care of yourself. You need supporting staff, friends, family who remind you to rest and can objectively advise you about things you do not see or do not recognize the importance of. Keep your advisors informed and listen to their perspectives.

Adapted from: "Grief Leadership," Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. www.CSTOnline.org

Online Resources – Information about Trauma and Coping

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry www.aacap.org

American Academy of Pediatrics www.aap.org

American Psychiatric Association www.psych.org

American Psychological Association www.apa.org

American Red Cross www.redcross.org

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress www.cstsonline.org

National Child Traumatic Stress Network <http://nctsnet.org/>