Tips for leaders

Managing a workplace or organisation impacted by disaster

Disasters that impact the workplace, whether natural or human-made, may create an unusual set of challenges for leaders and managers. You and your team of staff and volunteers may experience emotional stress, physical injury, grief or disruption of normal routines. At the same time, the team may face new responsibilities — caring for its own members and facilitating community recovery. Besides meeting the needs of the community following a disaster, staff and volunteers may have other unique requirements and stressors. Many of the psychological concerns associated with a disaster appear after the event itself, and can be mitigated by effective management. The following can help leaders, managers, and supervisors structure their response.

Take care of your people first

First, locate your staff and volunteers and assure them that they and their families have medical care and other necessities available so they can be effective in the workplace. This task will be easier if you have planned for it in advance. Adjust office rules and procedures that are counterproductive after a disaster. For example, dress codes, rules about children in the office, and restrictions on using telephones for personal use, may need to be adjusted in the post-disaster period.

Take steps to prevent accidents and illness

Reinstate training for emergency response and communications for help. People who are exhausted often forget to take necessary steps to prevent injury and illness. Reminders and retraining can be valuable. Review the workplace for physical risks recognising that individuals' capacity for usual attention and energy may be less than usual.

Prevent overwork and exhaustion

After an initial crisis period during which additional work or overtime may be necessary, develop procedures to assure that staff and volunteers do not work too many hours without rest. It is particularly important to prevent overtime and exhaustion that can occur as people dedicate themselves to new tasks and responsibilities.

Exhaustion and lack of sleep can decrease alertness, impair judgment, and make people more vulnerable to accidents. Establish work and rest times. Rest is best when it is away from work, unless safety at work is greater.

Attempt to provide adequate staffing

For any new responsibilities created after the disaster and for usual responsibilities that become more demanding, attempt to provide adequate staffing. Prior planning and training can make a big difference. Set clear priorities, including identifying work that does not require completion in the short term. Ensure that no person has an essential task that no one else knows how to do, as that person will likely become overworked.

Train managers and supervisors to monitor their teams

Ensure that personnel are not working excessive hours, and check for signs of exhaustion. In stressful times, leaders and highly dedicated staff and employees are more likely to overwork than other personnel. It may seem ironic, but after a disaster, senior leaders need to pay more attention to the conscientious individuals who normally require the least supervisory attention. Point out to managers and supervisors that they need to model healthy behaviours; this will help them monitor their own tendencies to overwork.

Encourage and facilitate healthy, safe behaviour

Remind staff and volunteers of the importance of getting adequate sleep and rest, drinking enough water, and taking steps to avoid any potential hazards in their environment.

Most people are resilient and will recover from their traumatic experiences. To facilitate the recovery process, individuals may need to talk about what they have gone through, understand their reactions, exchange information, and provide one another with support and consolation. The most effective way is usually to make it easy for people to talk when they feel ready, and not to pressure them to talk about the traumatic situation.

Provide an informal break area where people can gather for snacks or lunch and spend a little time talking with their colleagues. Whenever possible, try to keep established teams together to build on the strength of existing work relationships. If an individual must work alone or with strangers, find a way for them to communicate with the larger organisation, obtain information about how their colleagues are faring, and be assured they are still part of the group.

If you have a mental health service available, such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), make that service known and available to the team. Most people will not require extensive personal counselling, but will appreciate information and advice about issues such as how to deal with their children's reactions to the disaster. A few people may need more extensive mental health assistance. EAPs and local general practitioners (GPs) are well informed and resourceful about locating professional care for those who need it.

Leadership communication: Anticipating and responding to stressful events

How leaders and managers behave and communicate during stressful situations, such as the response to a disaster, can make significant differences in how people respond and react. It may also influence whether leadership is strengthened or diminished. This communication can take many forms including written messages, and formal and informal talks.

The leader - Strong leaders know and care about their people. Caring is demonstrated in everyday activities and interactions and can be especially powerful at key times. Optimally, leaders also know the characteristics of their people, what they have experienced, the nature of the work they do, and how they respond best to the efforts of leaders. Effective leaders capitalise on this informed compassion during events when people may be especially vulnerable or in need of support and reassurance.
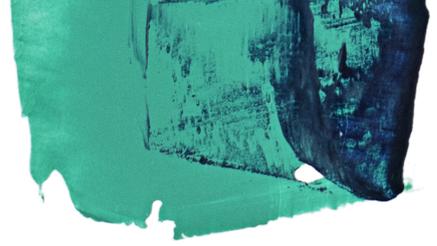
Vulnerability - Vulnerability is a function of many internal and external factors. Strong leaders are continuously vigilant in identifying factors that have the potential to negatively affect people (such as times that remind people of loss or trauma). They are also aware of those factors that can reduce vulnerability (such as health status, peer and leadership support, and a healthy organisational culture).

Message development - There are many factors to consider in optimising communications at times of increased or high stress. Many of these principles, like the ones presented here, derive from the field of risk and crisis communication.

Additionally, how you deliver your message will often have a greater impact than what you say or do.

- Consider and craft messages ahead of time.

- In high stress situations, people process information differently (e.g., inattentive, distractible); messages need to be short, simple, and repeated.

- Under stress, people focus on negatives more than positives, so positive messages should outnumber negative messages, ideally 3:1.

- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." Make sure to commit to finding out and following up.

- A helpful and valuable model is Compassion, Conviction, Optimism (CCO): Compassion (statement demonstrating that you care/empathise with the intended audience); Conviction (statement demonstrating commitment to helping/supporting/solving); Optimism (statement indicating a positive view of the future).

- People are most likely to remember things they have heard in a specific order, based on primacy and recency: first, last, middle. Your most important message goes first and next most important goes last. Prioritise messages this way to enhance understanding.

Further resources

- Covello VT. Best practices in public health risk and crisis communication. J Health Commun. 2003;8(Suppl. 1); 5–8.

- Vineburgh N, Ursano R, Hamaoka D, Fullerton C. Public health communication for disaster planning and response. Int J Public Pol. 2008;3(5/6): 292–301.

Adapted with permission from the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

If anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties or irritability persist for more than two weeks after your return home, you should talk to your GP. For immediate assistance and/or 24-hour counselling and referrals, see details on the right.

Useful services and resources

Lifeline - for immediate assistance
13 11 14

Australian Psychological Society - find a psychologist
1800 333 497

Beyond Blue
1300 224 636

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