



THE SUPERVISOR/HR NEWSLETTER

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Jan.
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Addressing Employees' Needs in a Crisis

When a traumatic event occurs in the workplace, employees and often the entire organization are impacted. This is a special time that requires special management. Through their immediate and supportive actions, managers can significantly contribute to the recovery of individuals directly and indirectly impacted. Here are some examples of steps managers can take in a crisis:

Safety

- Follow all emergency response procedures to ensure the physical safety of employees, customers, or other visitors in the workplace.
- Contact 9-1-1 for appropriate local law enforcement or fire department personnel.
- Depending upon the nature of the event, help the employees secure or evacuate the building, move to a designated shelter, or follow lockdown procedures.
- Take a count of everyone assembled, and determine if anyone is missing. Inform emergency response personnel of any missing employees.
- Communicate in a calm, controlled manner. Reassure employees that they are safe.
- When available, communicate accurate and verified information to emergency response personnel, your manager, employees, and others with a need-to-know position.

Triage

- Identify those employees most at risk physically. Give necessary emergency first aid and emotional support. If possible, ask about any history of exhibited physical problems. Provide information to emergency response personnel when they arrive. Enlist other employees to stay with their coworkers at the workplace and, if feasible, at the hospital.
- Contact family members of hurt employees and, in a caring manner, inform them of the event. Offer transportation to the hospital, if needed.

Assessment and Follow-Through

- Identify employees who were directly or indirectly involved, for example, any who were minimally hurt during the event, witnesses, or first responders. Talk to them to judge how they were affected. You will likely observe a wide range of reactions: from none to extreme agitation. Explain that everyone's reactions are normal responses to an abnormal event. Calmly give them encouragement and support. If necessary, find a coworker to act as a buddy to someone who continues to cry or remains agitated. Consult with your manager, employee assistance program (EAP), or other professional resource if you become concerned about an employee's extreme state of mind.
- Communicate with supervisors and team leaders to assist in identifying needs and providing support. Possible acute needs include water and food, a change of clothing, phones to contact loved ones, and transportation home.
- Arrange transportation for anyone needing non-acute medical care.

Advocacy

- If needed, request additional support from senior management. You may need coverage from other areas or departments to balance out the disruption in your work team. Let senior management know that normal work productivity will be reduced for a period of time after the event.
- Be flexible in work schedules; for example, extend time to complete projects, and if a funeral or memorial service is held during the workday, encourage employees to attend.
- Consult with EAP about available services and on-site support. Inform employees if any arrangements are made.
- Foster opportunities for coworkers to support one another.

Communication

- Notify the next of kin in cases of fatal accidental, suicidal, or homicidal death.
- Share information as soon as it becomes available. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." Follow up when you find the answers to those questions.
- Always communicate in a caring and understanding manner. Talking about an incident is one of the ways we recover from a traumatic event. Model that behavior by sharing your feelings and experience of the incident. However, make sure you have first talked through your experience with someone else. You will want to convey your personal side without losing your composure.
- Help employees feel supported by your presence. Be visible, ask them how they are doing, and be a good listener. Don't judge their experience or give them advice about how they should be reacting. If you do, they will shut down and not be forthcoming in the future. Tell them you are extending an open-door policy to them as a result of this crisis. Make sure you can follow through with that promise.
- If you find that your time is limited and you're unable to stay on top of the communication process, appoint an information coordinator. That person can gather pertinent information from law enforcement, family members, or other sources; send updates; work with you to share major announcements at meetings; and so forth.

Return to Work

- Returning to normal work schedules and routines promotes a sense of normalcy and recovery from the traumatic experience. Help employees remain at work or return to work as soon as they can. Accommodate employee needs or consider temporary adjustments.
- Provide information on the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or other sources of support. Explain why these resources can be helpful at times like these.
- Keep in contact with employees who are off work due to the incident. Help them with the transition back to work when they return.

Source

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (n.d.). *Psychological first aid: How you can support well-being in disaster victims*. Retrieved April 22, 2019, from <https://www.cstsonline.org>

Sulaski, C. (Reviewed 2019). *Addressing employees' needs in a crisis*. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

Ask Your EAP!

The following are answers to common questions supervisors have regarding employee issues and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to the EAP for a management consultation.

Q. Poor job performance or unsatisfactory quality of work is obviously the number one issue with troubled employees. Beyond this, what is the most common problem among troubled employees, and how should supervisors respond?

A. The management research firm Center for Creative Leadership surveyed over 200 supervisors and discovered that the most common employee problem (other than poor job performance) is “inability to get along with others.” Conflict and friction between two employees are not uncommon, but beware of employees who (1) blame others for their problems, (2) make others feel guilty for not living up to their expectations, (3) show an inability to own “their half” of problems, (4) have little insight into their behavior, (5) view discussions about their behavior as personal attacks, and (6) are overly adept at making excuses. These behaviors in combination are unlikely to respond to a corrective interview with you. Making an early referral to the EAP along with well-written documentation is recommended. (If you need help with constructing effective documentation, consult with the EAP.)

Q. I referred my employee to the EAP this morning because of his attendance issues. When he comes back to the office this afternoon, should I meet with him again? Or should I assume everything is fine, wait for the EAP to confirm his attendance, or discuss with him the expectations going forward?

A. If your employee went to the EAP and you previously had contact with the program in arranging the referral, you should get confirmation of participation if a release was signed. Regardless, meet with your employee and discuss the essential duties of his position, the reasons for the referral, and your expectations for his attendance. Doing so will increase the likelihood of having fewer or no more attendance problems. Then meet a few times over the ensuing weeks and months. This will further reinforce his need to follow through both with the EAP’s recommendations and with his commitment to a predictable attendance schedule. Lack of accountability and supervisor follow-up demotivates employees, causing their commitment to change to erode. The time you invest in reminding him and praising his return to proper performance standards will be well worth it.

Q. When supervisors inquire about complaints regarding harassment in a work unit, what are some of the classic mistakes they make that cause bigger problems later for organizations? It feels accusatory or at least somewhat awkward to mention the EAP as a source of support for a complainant.

A. A common mistake of supervisors investigating complaints of harassment is not working closely with their HR advisors or following instructions provided to them. Beyond these missteps, allowing one’s misconceptions about harassment to interfere with or influence an investigation can contribute to larger problems. An example includes suggesting, even slightly, that some responsibility lies with the victim of the harassment. Another is deciding or suggesting that the complaint is not that serious if a long delay exists between the date of the incident and its first report. Another is making a judgment that the incident is not serious, or making a statement about how serious it appears. Showing a lack of empathy or not appreciating that victims of harassment may feel powerless and traumatized are common blunders. Remember that victimized employees of any trauma can benefit from a confidential and empathetic listener. This role belongs to your EAP, so a supervisor’s suggestion to use the EAP is completely appropriate.

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