

## ***When Trauma Strikes Your Workplace***

*This morning you were called to the scene of a terrible accident. Your foreman was killed while operating heavy equipment on the company's property. His co-workers called 999, and as the owner/manager you had the horrifying task of notifying his wife. The emergency medical team rushed him to the hospital, but nothing could be done.*

*Now, hours later, things are beginning to settle down. The police stayed for awhile to question you and the employees, but they've gone. You've called the company insurance carriers and attorney. You're shaken but you have to hold yourself together and make important decisions about what comes next.*

The decisions you make following a critical incident such as this one can seriously affect your workforce. Taking the proper action can reduce the chance of your employees suffering from post-traumatic stress. Naturally, you think first of medical and legal issues, which are foremost. If you are well prepared, your company has emergency procedures and annually reviews them. But even well-prepared managers sometimes forget the necessity of taking care of their employees' emotional well-being - and their own, as well - following a workplace trauma.

Days, weeks, or months after a trauma or tragedy takes place at work, you and your employees can suffer from the emotional aftermath of that incident. Health and attendance can be gravely affected. Morale can plummet. Accidents can increase. Productivity and performance can decline. With this in mind, be sure that your emergency procedures also include post-trauma emotional support for employees.

The odds of having a critical incident occur in your workplace are greater than you may think. Consider the following possibilities:

- serious injury or accident
- medical emergency such as heart attack or stroke
- physical fighting or other violence
- natural disaster
- suicide
- spousal abuse that spills over to the workplace
- attacks by outraged vendors or customers
- armed robbery
- rape
- mentally disordered behaviour from employees or others

No workplace setting is immune to any of these traumas. More than one type can occur in any work setting. Being prepared to deal with such incidents is an important factor in how well you and your employees are able to cope with the aftermath when a workplace trauma occurs.

The first step following a major crisis in the workplace is the critical incident debriefing. Within 48 hours, preferably within 24 hours, following a critical incident, hold a meeting for debriefing employees. A mental health professional or other qualified consultant should be engaged to assist you and your staff in this process. You will be best served if you use a professional who has already worked with your company and knows you and your employees. The purpose of the critical incident debriefing is to normalize emotions by helping employees understand some of the reactions they may have, by encouraging

employees to gain support from each other, by recalling positive and productive coping strategies, and by allowing them an opportunity to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. This verbalization of emotions is important for people who don't cope well when they have to suppress their feelings and hide or downplay their emotions. Naturally, some employees will choose to express more feeling than others, who may do better by saying little and listening a lot.

A follow-up debriefing with the same professional or consultant should occur within a couple of weeks. This debriefing allows employees to share what coping strategies have worked best for them, to discuss any feelings which have come up since the time of the first debriefing, and, generally speaking, to monitor their progress. Oftentimes, employees are better able to think through their reactions, once they have recovered somewhat from the initial shock of the incident. This is a good time to offer private counseling sessions for those who are not recovering quickly and feel they need additional help.

Management must keep a watchful eye on personnel for several weeks, even months, following a critical incident. Look for signs of irritability, fatigue, negativity, nervousness, poor health or aches and pains, critical and demanding behavior, drug or alcohol abuse, or apathy. If an employee seems to be going downhill, be sure to ask about whether or not he or she has been reflecting on the incident. The employee may need to speak with a professional about it. Critical incidents can sometimes trigger memories of painful and unresolved events in an employee's life; these more deeply rooted reactions are best addressed by a mental health professional.

Usually, the employee does not need on-going counseling, but only needs to speak with an outside consultant in a similar manner to that of the critical incident debriefing and follow-up meeting. It is oftentimes important for management to participate in this consultation in order to provide reassurances or support that the employee may need, especially when the incident has caused anxiety about the employee's own safety.

Management should take advantage of the opportunity of increased levels of communication that develop immediately following a crisis. This period, if used productively to develop a unified team, will solidify relationships rather than rupture them. Over the long term, ongoing improvements in company-wide communication will help to decrease the possibility of post-traumatic stress interfering with the well-being of the workforce.

Last, but certainly not least, take care of yourself. As a leader, your example is of utmost importance. And for your own benefit, you must pay attention to your health, both physical and emotional. You, too, will need to talk about what happened--settle your own confusion, quiet your own feelings, examine and understand your reactions, and shed any fears you may have. When you speak to those professionals whom you've commissioned, ask for some private time for yourself. Even if you think you won't have a lot to say, go ahead with it. You may surprise yourself.

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