Vitality

Crisis Management: Considerations and Support

Have you ever thought about how you would react and respond if a crisis happened within your organization?

We frequently hear about situations within our communities and around the world which may be considered shocking, worrisome, and unsettling with potentially varying implications to your employees. While we, as leaders, like to think that we are well prepared and well equipped and would know exactly how to respond with a level head, encountering and experiencing a crisis situation can leave employees feeling vulnerable and fill leaders' minds with questions about what we should and could do to help. The reality is there is always the potential that a crisis may occur that could impact employees within your organization, and knowing what to do can significantly affect the outcomes for everyone affected. Formalized crisis management planning provides psychological support within an organization so that employees affected by a traumatic event can feel safe, can recognize and process their physical stress and emotional reactions, and can regain a sense of stability and continuity during recovery.

So, how can those involved move past the crisis event and return to what may, for some time, be considered a "new normal"? It requires dedicated focus from an organization to anticipate and plan for reactions during different types of crises; measures for recognizing and responding with immediate support; and follow through to ensure that care extends beyond the event.

What constitutes a crisis?

There's a wide range of crisis situations that can occur within any organization. Employees may experience workplace accidents or violence. They might witness traumatic events (such as robberies and transportation accidents) as participants or as first responders. They could also be affected by a co-worker's mental health challenges or death (from illness or accidents, by suicide, or in the line-of-duty). There could even be a need to address low morale arising from changes related to organizational restructuring.

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All of the unique circumstances associated with each incident will have an effect on how employees cope, address and recover from the trauma.

These catalysts create a need to embrace immediate and short-term psychological care to help "restore equilibrium, functioning and to minimize the potential of long-term harm."[1]

What do employees need most in a crisis?

Above all, employees will look for the organization's leaders to acknowledge that there is an active incident and share accurate information and knowledge about the crisis event. Due to their nature, crises are often chaotic, and the speed with which they can occur can create an information vacuum.

- Employees will expect an immediate reaction and reassurance that a response is in place.

- Crisis events compromise people's natural environments and their emotions. Employees will need to know that they are safe, that they are well-supported, and that their organization and leadership care about them.

- They will want to know that someone is listening to what they have to say and that the organization wants to continue to hear from them.

- Employees, in turn, need to understand their collective strengths and capabilities, while having confidence that someone is taking the lead to help find the way for things to return to normal.

Being prepared with the best-laid plans

Crisis situations are unpredictable, and the effects on an organization are unavoidable. Many companies are no longer leaving things up to chance, but, instead, they are taking time to develop and test formal Crisis Management Plans. Those companies will be most resilient as a crisis unfolds. They will also be more confident in their reactions and will be able to respond most rapidly to put supports in place for their employees.

An article in the Ivey Business Journal published shortly after 9/11 shared some critical insights that continue to hold true today:

No organization is capable of preparing for all crises that might potentially affect it, nor should it attempt to develop that capability. Instead, preparing a portfolio of responses to different clusters of crises increases the likelihood that if a crisis occurs, people will think clearly, to improvise to deal with the immediate situation, gather facts quickly, and make decisions and take action to ensure the best response possible.[2]

Organizations vary in size, complexity and demographics. As leaders, we can simplify, as needed, to create a fairly straightforward process when developing a crisis management procedure and/or solution. A first step is to establish a dedicated crisis response team.

1. Choose who will lead the response team, and who else will participate

It starts with identifying who will be responsible for leading the core response team and determining what other representatives from the business should be involved. Generally, the team is comprised of a core group of C-Level Executives, frontline leaders and supervisors. A smaller, more intimate core group is often better to keep priorities clearly established. Each team member must understand their role in helping employees through an incident while keeping the team's overall mandate in perspective.

2. Discuss what kinds of crisis event could happen

As part of pre-planning, the group will need to talk through different situations and potential scenarios that could arise. Having conversations about business operations and the effect that crises could have on employees individually, but also on work teams, is essential. The team must be able to identify, "the needs and vulnerabilities of their organization, environments, stakeholders and industry."[3] The value of these discussions shouldn't be discounted: too narrow a focus on one area or another could make for devastating consequences during a live crisis event. It's crucial not to underestimate the psychological effects a crisis could have on a workplace. The team needs to plan for the "people" issues that will follow.

3. Document the plan

Investing time in the discussions is vital, but having a documented plan for employees to follow through the chaos that often ensues during a crisis situation will make all the difference. The plan should identify each team member's role during a crisis event and the tasks they are expected to handle. It should also list the procedures to follow for some main crisis themes. Keep in mind though, that documentation should not try and cover off every scenario.

4. Testing

Having a base plan will prove invaluable and allow you to deal with curve-balls that will arise. The team should regularly choose a scenario and walk through what the response would be. This exercise will help everyone understand their reactions, how they think on their feet and their resilience.

5. Communications are key

Don't underestimate the value and importance of communications as a component of the plan. It's something that is often overlooked. As leaders, we may assume that it's about getting messages out, but listening to the pulse of what is happening and collecting information to understand how the situation is evolving is critically important. Communication encompasses perspective, tone, and emotion. It also creates confidence and trust.

What if your organization doesn't have a dedicated team or plan, or your existing crisis management team needs help?

Organizations that don't have a dedicated team or focused plan to help guide their response during a crisis will have a harder time supporting employees during and after an incident. There will be a myriad of disruptions that follow and working through these on-the-fly may not be as effective as if pre-planning had been in place. It will take longer to emerge from the crisis if you don't have a vision of what the post-incident world will look like. Since the reaction needs to be immediate, it may be more effective in the moment to recognize when professionals need to be introduced.

There could also be times where the incident is so severe or overwhelming for an organization with established teams and protocols that they need immediate onsite help.

A professional crisis management response team offers a range of trauma response experts who can deploy personal services immediately wherever they are needed. They will help leaders work with employees when addressing incidents and provide immediate and longer-term help for groups and individuals. As third party experts and observers, they can dig deep, drawing from their experiences working through crisis situations with other organizations, bringing forward important perspectives and ensuring objectivity is in place.

Professional crisis management teams offer education for leaders and internal teams about what to look for as employees exhibit signs of distress. They can share warning signs and provide solutions for leaders to use to help employees work through the event. For example, one area of focus might be to teach leaders indicators for self-harm and/or suicide. The team may teach leaders how to encourage those impacted to seek the assistance needed, how to converse – even through difficult conversations – and how to convey support while listening. They will also ensure the leadership team feels well supported and, during the consultation, help them understand when it's time to have an expert intervene, and even when to call 911.

How long will it be until things get back to normal?

It is important to recognize that, after the intensity and immediacy of initial responses to a traumatic event, it will take time for employees to process what has happened. In fact, this process can last weeks, months, or longer and movement between various phases of acceptance can re-intensify around milestone dates, even after a significant amount of time has passed. You may find that some employees lament and focus on "lasts" – like recalling when it was the last time something happened before the crisis. Others may focus on "firsts" – such as the first office party after the event. All of these are indicative that employees are still processing information about the crisis and leaders should realize that they "cannot artificially speed [that] up."[4]

Having the infrastructure in place to continue to address any challenges that may arise can be extremely helpful. Leaders and employees should continue to access support from their primary care provider or Employee and Family Assistance Plans (EFAP), as needed. Leaders should also continue to assess where their organizations are at and be prepared to continue to administer Psychological First Aid whenever necessary.

What is Psychological First Aid?

Psychological First Aid reduces distress, fosters short and long-term adaptiveness and coping, and links distressed employees to additional services that are available to them. It's based on the premise that employees affected by a traumatic event will experience a broad range of early reactions that could be physical, psychological, behavioural or spiritual in nature. Psychological First Aid is administered by compassionate and caring crisis responders. Leaders within an organization can learn to spot employees who are in distress and in need of this kind of service.

Over time, employees and organizations will recover with the help of their natural support systems, such as friends, family and co-workers. Ensuring these support systems are in place will help everyone move through the emotions associated with the crisis, showing them the way to restore their functioning to what it was before the incident.

References:

1. Ptack, A. (2019). Crisis Intervention Strategies. [Presentation Slides]

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3 Ibid. Para. 33.

4. Homewood Health. (2015). Supporting Grieving Employees: Recommendations for Managers.
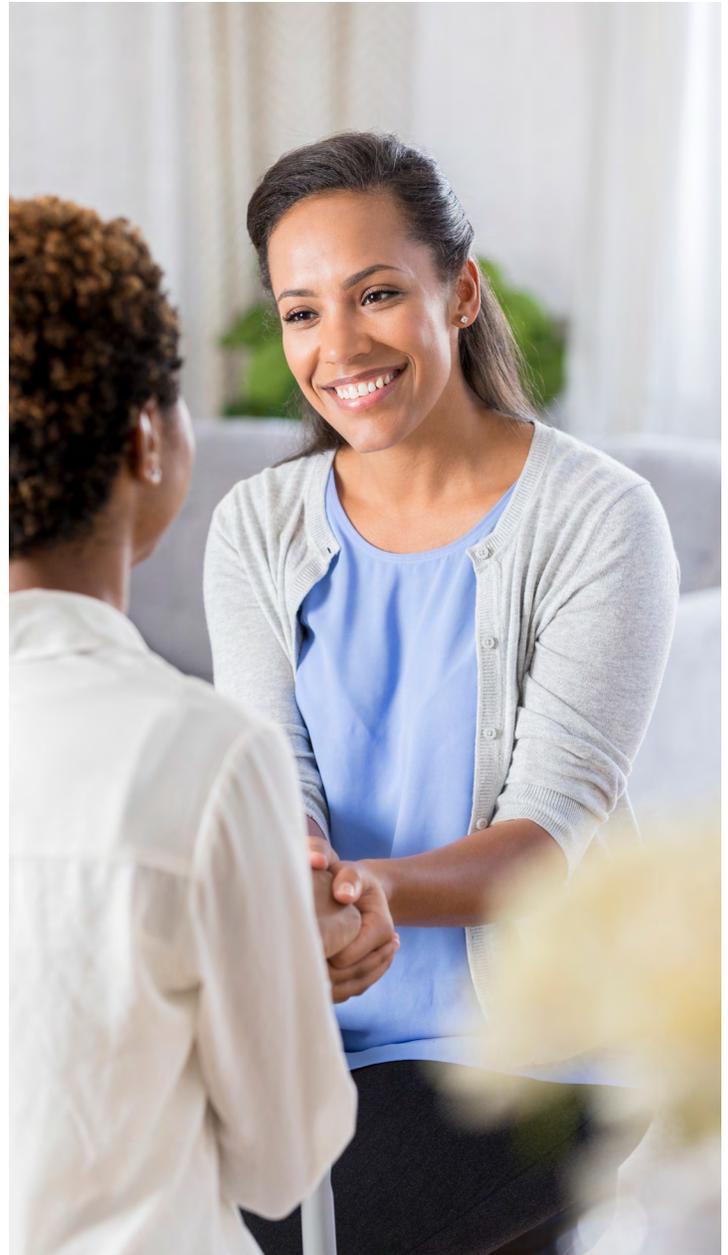
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