

How to Contain the Chaos and Empower Your Employees During a Crisis

By Bob Vandepol July 10, 2019



When dealing with a crisis, a leader's role is largely to guide others through it. Good leaders understand that everyone responds to crisis differently and know that they must be prepared for the myriad ways people may react when faced with tragedy.

Tragedies often trigger additional tragedies. When under the influence of the shock of traumatic stress, people and organizations often make errors in judgment that lead to additional losses. Rash high-risk decisions and behaviors, precipitous resignations, hostile blaming, drunk driving charges, violence at home and work, and increased suicide risk are examples of how traumatized people can make a bad situation worse.

When people are shocked by a tragedy, immediate chemical and neuro-psychological adjustments take place to address the present threat in one of three ways: Fight, Flight, or Freeze. Whereas these responses can have short-term survival value in the midst of a crisis, they often do not translate well to productivity in today's work environments.

Consider these reactions in terms of their potential impacts upon productivity and returning to work:

Fight

Amidst a perceived threat, people immediately try to make sense of the incident in an attempt to gain some sense of control over it. Unfortunately, these decisions tend to be impulsive, extreme and self-protective. Conditions are ripe for hostile blame and the resultant allegations need not be accurate to be destructive.

- As people revert to primal defenses, risk of workplace violence and suicide increase.
- Self-blame and other-directed blame impair productivity, teamwork and morale.
- Frustration directed at or witnessed by customers damages service delivery and organizational reputation.
- Vengeful litigation and corporate disparagement increase in likelihood.

Flight

Avoidance behavior is characteristic of acute traumatic stress. Impacted employees may seek to avoid any stimuli associated with the incident. This can include avoidance of the worksite, co-workers, tasks associated with the tragedy, etc. Some withdraw from co-workers because of fear that those conversations will produce emotional vulnerability.

- Absenteeism, especially when unplanned, increases replacement costs and slows productivity targeted at deadlines.
- Attrition increases recruitment and training costs plus leads to loss of intellectual and relational capital.
- Distancing inhibits teamwork and the exchange of necessary communication.

Freeze

Following traumatic events, people often report feeling numbly immobilized. For a period of time, many experience difficulty thinking abstractly, focusing and multi-tasking. Some express this reaction as a desire to “remain invisible.”

- Excessive “hunkering down” produces ineffective, indecisive results.
- Extended inaction decreases likelihood of employees ever returning to work, resulting in disability and workers compensation claims.

Like the presence of police tape at a crime scene or blockades at a highway traffic accident, good crisis management quickly establishes a perimeter in an attempt to contain the crisis. Leaders need to tactically snatch operational control to “stop the skid” and are likely well trained in how to do so. They may not be as well trained in how to contain psychological skids, however. Trust will likely be in jeopardy but can be restored when leaders visibly demonstrate a rare combination of both competence and compassion. This combination is not easy to deliver

simultaneously – especially when the leader may also be impacted by the tragedy. Often, leaders' own emotional reactions influence them toward appearing either just competent or just compassionate. Order, calm and safety are restored when people are assured that 1) their leaders are capable of dealing with the issue and 2) will do so in a way that cares about them personally. Fear and rage can be contagious. So is calm.

Chaos is reduced when people are led by quick, simple movement back to what they can understand and that produces a sense of safety. This sense of order is achieved via:

- **Meaningful information.** Communicate. Communicate. Communicate. Keep it simple. Make it practical. Focus upon immediate solutions. Repeat it.
- **Resolution of a familiar schedule.** Individuals and especially groups function best when natural rhythms kick back in. Routine. No surprises. One foot in front of the other just like yesterday.
- **Successful completion of familiar tasks.** The powerlessness that accompanies tragedy is fearsome in and of itself. A sense of personal and group efficacy delivers increased calm. Direct people toward what they do have control over to reduce panic regarding what they do not. Focus them upon what they CAN do to eliminate paralysis over what they cannot. Sometimes this activity needs to be adapted so it's not too challenging, but even completing concrete, simple tasks creates momentum for resuming full function.

Effective crisis leadership includes emphasis upon transition to a future focus and next steps. Response that compassionately acknowledges the impact of the incident and communicates pertinent information is foundational but not enough. People derive a healthy sense of order and efficacy when gently but decisively steered away from reactive decisions toward routine, concrete, productive tasks. Doing so communicates a hopeful expectation of recovery that empowers and is likely to be internalized by them. Healthy, life-giving control mitigates anger and anxiety and allows natural resilience to occur.