

# Leadership in Times of Crisis: Critical Incident Response After Tragedy

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It can happen here. When tragedy strikes the workplace — a fatal accident, violence, suicide, a robbery, or natural disaster — all employees immediately look to its leadership for direction. How those leaders respond when all eyes are upon them offers both tremendous opportunity and serious risk for the subsequent outcomes. Reactions to their leadership will echo throughout the organization as others take their cue from the charted direction. Employees will go through the crisis with or without leadership. Lead them.

Whereas business leaders possess many skills, they often do not have crisis leadership training, experience, or expertise that includes the “human element.” **All** crises are human crises. Business continuity issues such as technology, infrastructure, and cost containment must be addressed, but ultimately the most important asset at stake is people – both as humans with value and as

employees. Leaders may genuinely care about their employees but must find ways to express it effectively.

*There is no business recovery without people who:*

- Are **healthy** enough to return to work and be productive
- Are assured enough of their **safety** to not feel afraid to return to work
- Have had their **trust** in the leadership established so that they desire to return to work
- Have had their **loyalty rewarded** so they remain employees over the short haul and the long haul.

*Marsh Crisis Academy 2003*

## **Healthy**

Crises typically do not cause psychological illness, but, conceptually, can produce more of an “injury”. Whereas there is a predictable set of emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physical reactions that usually accompany traumatic stress, research indicates that we are an amazingly resilient species. Leaders must convincingly cast the vision of a “new normal” that includes an expectation of recovery. Healthcare professionals unanimously identify how expecting to get better fuels actually getting better. Sensitively communicating an expectation of resilience rather than pathology makes it more likely to happen. Time is off the essence. It is important to respond quickly in a way that fosters individual and organizational resilience.

## **Safe**

Perception is reality – especially when safety is concerned following a tragedy. Leaders do well to immediately implement security, infrastructure, and logistical steps that visibly demonstrate increased safety. People also benefit from the psychological safety gained from visible leadership presence that communicates both caring and competence. When people perceive, correctly or not, that their leaders are minimizing their situation or are helpless to rectify it, they become increasingly panicked and angry. There is tremendous power in calm presence.

## **Trust**

Trust of leadership and a desirable organizational culture are also at risk. A dynamic common to groups following a traumatic incident is increased we/they thinking and blaming of identified leaders for problems related and unrelated to the incident.

People impacted by trauma predictably tend to:

### 1. Regress to more basic, primitive impulses and defenses

- The brain is re-circuited toward use of functions focused upon creating an immediate sense of safety. These thought patterns are not necessarily logical as the portions of the

brain dealing with advanced abstract thought are “put on hold”. Very few people get smarter when traumatized.

- Decisions tend to be impulsive, extreme, and based more on emotion than logic.
- Emotional responses are magnified and self-protective.

2. Immediately attempt to make sense of the incident in effort to gain a feeling of control over it.

- The belief is that if one can understand the incident, s/he can be safer by preventing it next time.
- When the answer to “why” isn’t available, people will create one and that understanding is likely to be reactive and lack objectivity.

3. Isolate from others

- The lack of control experienced in the tragedy leads people to pull away from others in distrust.

Add these factors together and conditions are ripe for hostility and blame with the organization’s leadership positioned as the most convenient target. Following tragedy, the allegations of blame need not be accurate to be powerfully destructive.

### **Rewarded loyalty**

People have choices and leaders wish for their organization to represent a desirable place to belong. Responding poorly can lead to the costs of attrition, litigation, increased workers compensation claims, reputational damage, and diminished morale. Nothing supports loyalty more than having their leader really be there for them on the worst day of their life.

An Employee Assistance Program can provide Critical Incident Response (CIR) consultants – behavioral health professionals specifically trained in workplace crisis response – to support your leadership efforts. Due to their clinical training, they understand human behavior and the effects of potentially traumatic events, communicate empathetically, and can usually maintain poise under very stressful conditions. They have also been trained to assess and triage situations in which access to additional services are required – especially imminent danger of harm to self or others. The combination of clinical excellence along with sensitivity to unique business cultures and objectives can make an immense positive difference in terms of both human and business recovery. Selecting from a continuum of structured group and individual interventions, the Critical Incident Response Consultant provides a safe, directed environment to:

1. Consult with leadership to shape the response effectively
2. Position leadership favorably through shared messaging
3. Allow people to talk if they wish to do so
4. Identify and normalize acute traumatic stress reactions so that those impacted by them do not panic about them

5. Build group support within work teams
6. Outline self-help recovery strategies
7. Brainstorm solutions to overcome immediate return-to-work and return-to-life obstacles
8. Triage movement toward either immediate business-as-usual functioning or additional care

Crisis Care Network (now R3 Continuum), the largest provider of Critical Incident Response services to the workplace, developed a crisis communication process that has been helpful for both Consultants and business leaders. The acronym ACT describes a means of Acknowledging, Communicating, and Transitioning amidst a crisis.

**Acknowledge and name the incident**

- Have an accurate understanding of the facts and avoid conjecture.
- Demonstrate the courage to use real language that specifically names what occurred.
- Acknowledge that the incident has an impact on team members and that it is ok that individuals will be impacted differently.
- Acknowledge briefly that the incident has an impact on you. Doing so compassionately makes you a less likely target of blame. People want to know that leaders care about them as people; not just as a source of revenue.

**Communicate pertinent information with both compassion and competence**

- In the absence of information, people create it. Providing information reduces the likelihood of rumors, builds trust, and provides a sense of order that supports moving forward.
- Although very difficult to do when impacted by traumatic stress, communicating with both competence and compassion demonstrates leadership effectiveness in a caring way. CIR Consultants often help business leaders by scripting and coaching their messaging.

**Transition toward a future focus**

- Communicate an expectation of recovery. Those impacted must gain a vision of “survivor” rather than “victim”. Research indicates that humans are an amazingly resilient species as we bounce back from adversity.
- Communicate flexible and reasonable accommodations as people progress to a new normal. Employees should not all be expected to immediately function at full productivity (although some will) but will recover quicker if assigned to simple, concrete tasks. Structure and focus are helpful and extended time away from work often inhibits recovery. “If you fall off a horse.....get back on a pony.”

Leaders often pinpoint a workplace tragedy as a pivot point for the ongoing status of their companies and work teams. Some identify how that incident actually launched a new sense of

loyalty, team cohesion, and commitment to safe work practices. Others bemoan that incident as triggering a collective negative image, increased conflict, and diminished morale. Competent, compassionate leadership makes the difference.