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*How can you help employees deal with
grief and trauma in the workplace?*

This practical, quick-response model really works.

THE CRYING GAME

“John was catching a quick nap in his chair in the company lunchroom; at least, I thought he was asleep,” said an employee of a California-based firm. “When I went over to wake him, he was dead. For a minute I couldn’t think what to do, but then someone called 911. None of us had ever had anything like that happen to us before. We were really shaken up.”

BY JANE HENDERSON-LONEY

Experiencing violence or loss in the workplace can upset employees and disrupt their performance. Organizations can prepare for such events by putting a trauma plan in place.

Setting the stage

Suicides, heart attacks, AIDS-related deaths, terrorist activities, and deaths by accident and homicide are all facts of modern workplace life. Whether an employee dies on or off the work site, colleagues are shocked and saddened. Many exhibit perfectly normal behaviors that nevertheless can temporarily disrupt business.

It's true that the loss of a co-worker seldom affects people's personal lives as profoundly as the loss of a family member. But the emotions are just as real. Co-workers may not be aware of the deep connections among them until something happens to someone on the team, and then they may not know how to appropriately grieve at work.

Internal or external human resource professionals can help prepare an organization for violence or loss by putting trauma procedures into place and by providing guidelines for employees to follow in the aftermath of trauma.

A recommended approach to dealing with organizational loss and violence was developed by Jeffrey Mitchell, a pioneer in trauma management. This quick-response model not only supports employees in a humane and effective way by addressing feelings and reactions, but also facilitates the rapid normalization of work activities.

The model for providing on-site intervention after a traumatic event or a loss is an educational model, not a therapeutic one. It requires the internal or external HR practitioner to

- ▶ be on site within 72 hours after a traumatic event
- ▶ be prepared to teach the principles of critical-incident management, including physical, emotional, behavioral, and mental reactions
- ▶ be skilled in group facilitation
- ▶ be able to make recommendations about ongoing employee support.

Do not schedule a debriefing for employees on the actual day of the traumatic event (or on the day of the funeral, in the case of a death). Most

CO-WORKERS MAY NOT KNOW HOW TO GRIEVE AT WORK

employees will be unaware of the ramifications of the shock until later. They will need time to surface feelings and reactions and—especially after workplace violence—to reconnect with people and restore a sense of control and order to their lives.

Hold debriefings at the work site, in a room that is comfortable and al-

lows some privacy. If a large number of employees are involved, use a team to conduct the debriefing, or have employees meet in small groups at staggered times. Take as many days as they need. Within a day or two after the first meetings, follow up with their managers and make any further recommendations.

Facilitating the debriefing

The debriefing serves both a teaching and a support function. These sessions shouldn't be conducted by just anyone. It is crucial for the debriefer to be properly trained in providing this kind of intervention. (For information about where to receive such training, contact the American Red Cross or the International Critical-Incident Stress

What Can You Do?

In the event of a traumatic event or a loss within a workplace team, managers should pay attention to these practical guidelines for handling critical incidents:

Have an emergency plan in place and train employees to carry it out. For example, be sure they know how to call emergency services; how to protect themselves from harm; how to help others, as appropriate; how to escape the work site if an escape plan is in place; and how to prepare for and react to natural disasters.

Determine who is affected. Does the incident affect a particular work team or a single site, or is the total workforce involved?

Assign one person to act as a conduit of information for the media.

Identify the resources needed to restore the affected employees to their normal work routines and productivity. Does their work site require any physical maintenance or repair? Will employees need the services of health-care providers, mental-health specialists, or trauma debriefers? The decision to involve trauma specialists should be made as quickly as possible, and they should render services within 48 hours of an incident.

In the event of a death in the workplace, identify the available resources and benefits (such as the

firm's employee-assistance program) for the friends and family of the deceased employee. Let them know about such resources as soon as possible, in a compassionate way.

Will you need external consultants for a workplace intervention? Be sure everyone knows who is empowered to make such a decision, who places the call, what the procedure is for authorizing payment, and to whom the bill goes.

Call in the resources you need as soon as possible. Prepare the work-site for the debriefing by checking the schedules of the employees who are involved and arranging for a comfortable room and privacy at the time of the meeting. During the session, arrange for someone who was not involved in the loss to fill in by receiving customers and answering calls.

If you're scheduling a debriefing, allow at least an hour for the group to meet. If a lot of employees are involved, it is best to have several meetings with smaller groups.

Follow up with the debriefer to determine whether other services are recommended. Of course, conversations in the debriefing meetings are confidential. But the facilitator will be able to give you general impressions of the group and to make suggestions.

Source: *U.S. Behavioral Health*.

Foundation, 410/730-4311.)

Begin the session by asking employees what they experienced at the time of the event or loss. For example, if the event was a robbery, ask them to discuss where they were, what they heard, and how they felt at the time. If a colleague has died after a terminal illness, encourage them to talk about the point at which they learned of his or her treatment or noticed his or her diminishing capacities. Determine whether anyone has had a previous experience that might be similar.

A common thread in these discussions is survivor guilt, often expressed as, "Why did she die so young?" or "It could have been me—we were the same age." Group members need to process this guilt and identify it as a normal, human feeling.

Stress the following:

- ▶ emotional reactions
- ▶ mental reactions
- ▶ physical reactions
- ▶ behavioral reactions.

Explain to attendees that it is normal to feel fearful or anxious after a traumatic event like a robbery. They are likely to be distracted, preoccupied, or even short-tempered afterward. They can also expect to feel fatigue, depression, or jitters—and any of those reactions might manifest itself in a temporary disruption of work performance or other activities.

Part of the HR specialist's job is to identify the company's need to develop policies and procedures for preventing workplace violence, as well as for managing interventions after the fact.

Encourage the HR team to benchmark with others in the industry to identify standard practices and to determine who needs to be on the trauma team. For a well-rounded approach, consult with the security chief and the provider of the company's employee-assistance program, if one exists. Help the team design a company-specific checklist for managers to build into internal policies to guide their activities in a crisis.

How employees dealt with John's death

What about the case of John, the employee who was found dead in the company lunchroom?

A WOMAN BEGAN TO CRY. SHE HAD NOT BEEN CLOSE TO JOHN, BUT SHE SAW HIM EVERY DAY

At the request of the human resource manager, a trained debriefer arrived at the company 48 hours after the discovery of John's body. She invited employees to attend a confidential meeting in a conference room, or to drop in one-at-a-time after the meeting, if they preferred. No attendance records were kept.

The debriefer opened the meeting by asking employees to describe what they saw, heard, and felt on the day of the incident. Then she shared educational information to show them that their feelings were perfectly normal and to predict possible further reactions.

A woman began to cry quietly. She said that she had not been close to John, but that she interacted with him every day. In fact, he reminded her very much of her husband, who was the same age and who had some ongoing health concerns. She said she was afraid that the same thing would happen to him.

The woman's reaction was a common one; the death of a co-worker leaves many people feeling vulnerable to the unexpected. The debriefer assured her that her fear was normal and that she could create something positive from the experience by sharing her concerns with her husband and supporting his efforts to take better care of himself.

Other people in the group talked about John's good nature and willingness to help them with projects. They acknowledged that they would miss him.

One person suggested that the group prepare a card for John's wife, with a donation to the American Heart Association.

All of this helped the group mem-

bers process their feelings and eased them toward closure.

After an hour, the employees returned to work.

One member of John's work group came in afterward, alone. He said that John's death was a wake-up call to him—that he was now thinking more about his priorities in life and work. The debriefer reminded him that the company's employee-assistance program might also be a good resource for talking further about his reactions in a private setting.

A vehicle for grieving at work

Reports from the U.S. Department of Labor indicate that in 1992 homicide was the second leading cause of death in the workplace for men and the leading cause of death in the workplace for women. Northwestern National Life Insurance Company research has found that 2.2 million workers were physically attacked on the job in the 12 months ending with July 1993.

Given the scope of the problem, companies, schools, nonprofits, and government agencies need skilled consultants to help prevent and plan for workplace violence and loss. And that includes loss from layoffs and other major organizational changes, as well as from more dramatic events.

It is only recently that we have begun to understand the importance of providing a vehicle for grieving at work. A traumatic incident or loss can directly affect employees and diminish their productivity. Smart human resource managers realize that a debriefing process not only is a compassionate response, but also is a way to restore the survivors quickly to normal productivity. ■

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