Responding to External Crisis: Managing through Disruption

It's 11:00 am in your Manhattan headquarters, and you hear a colleague shout, "There's been an explosion in Chicago! Turn on CNN!"

The office erupts into a cacophony of questions, conjectures, and shared scraps of information as staff members begin searching the web for details.

You immediately dial your counterpart in the Chicago office, but just get "*All lines are busy.*" You try her cell, but there's no answer. Moments later, as you're leaving a voicemail, an "All Staff" email comes around from your office head:

> "At 9:45 Central Time, there was a large explosion at Chicago O'Hare Airport. Our Chicago office is not in the vicinity of the explosion. The airport has been closed. At this time, no further information has been released. Please make every attempt to return to business as usual. We will keep you updated on any further developments."

You can hear the commotion outside your office continue as people call out breaking news:

> "At least 28 people are injured!"

> "Wait, this says more than 30!"

You hear one employee sobbing, and another cursing quietly.

Business as usual? *Is that even possible?*

What can you do to support your staff in regaining their equilibrium?

Managing through disruption is one of the most difficult responsibilities there is. If you manage people, it's your job to be there to support and direct them through times of turmoil. To help them successfully navigate through the commotion and stay on course.

Any critical event, internal or external, causes disruption. It's inevitable. If it didn't, if your staff didn't respond at all, that would be a problem of a different nature. (Apathy or indifference are common reactions to accumulated exposure to crisis and stress.)

When the external crisis is an act of terrorism, maintaining our equilibrium is one way of fighting back. Disruption is the point of terrorism. Not just the immediate, localized disruption, but the power to paralyze entire nations. When we break free of that paralysis and resume normal functioning as quickly as we can, we take that power away.

So how can you help your co-workers achieve that victory?

We asked Dr. Jay Sandys, Vice President of Clinical Services & EAP Operations at CCA for some insight. Jay oversees CCA's Management Consult Team, helping organizations manage through disruption on a daily basis.

Here's what Dr. Sandys recommends:

Above all, project a calm and reassuring presence. Acknowledge that the event is upsetting for everyone, including you, but don't display overt anxiety.

- Determine if anyone in your office is directly impacted (e.g. has a loved one in the area who is unreachable or was injured).

  - Speak to that individual in private to determine if s/he feels able to continue working.

  - Offer to connect the employee with an EAP counselor for immediate support.

  - Have someone stay with the employee if necessary.

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- If those who are visibly distressed aren't directly impacted, take them aside separately.
  - In private, ask each one why s/he is so upset.
  - Address their concerns.
  - Offer in the moment support.
  - Point out that their reactions may be disruptive to the rest of the team.
  - If either employee is unable to calm down, offer to connect them with your EAP.
  - If necessary, consider what reasonable accommodations can be made for the employee.
- Address your team collectively
  - Inform them about what you know and what you don't know. In this instance, you know that your office in Chicago was not directly impacted.
  - Offer them a chance to meet as a group and talk about their concerns.
  - Make sure to show that you support your team and empathize with them.
  - Remind your staff that you share their concerns, but emphasize that work still needs to get done.
  - Impress upon them that focusing on work and pursuing normal activities will help keep anxiety under control.
- Expect some decreased productivity immediately after a major disaster.
- **Strategize with your team and elicit their input** about the best ways to:
  - Cover essential or time-sensitive tasks for affected colleagues, if necessary
  - Identify and meet crucial goals for the day (e.g., client-facing work takes precedence over internal deadlines)
  - Keep the team informed about additional breaking news, while allowing most of them to get back to work, for example, consider:
    - Appointing someone to monitor the news for pertinent updates
    - Rotating the assignment to limit overexposure

Best Practice: *Develop a response plan before you need it.*

Your organization probably has a general crisis response plan in place already; make sure you know what it is and communicate it to your staff.

Add details to the plan that are relevant to your team and their responsibilities.

This approach will give the team a sense of confidence that will improve their ability to respond in the moment.

Managing through disruption requires a calm, empathetic management style.

Be careful to avoid the following behaviors that could be perceived as callous or uncaring.

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Don't:

Ignore the Situation

Get angry

Demand people go back to work immediately

Be inflexible
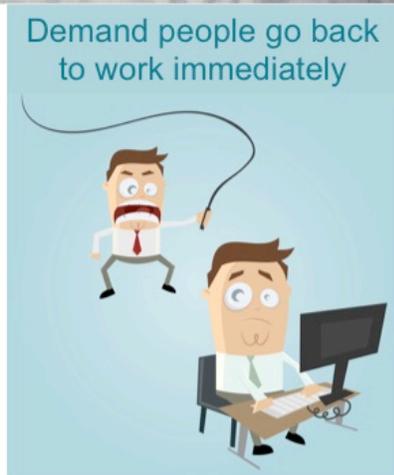
Be insensitive or dismissive

Working through disruption is difficult, but these recommendations can help you and your team overcome the challenge and move forward.