



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

MANAGING A WORKPLACE OR AN ORGANIZATION AFTER A DISASTER

A disaster such as an earthquake or hurricane creates unusual challenges for management. You and your staff may find yourselves suffering from its effects. Emotional stress, physical injury, bereavement, loss of property, and disruption of normal routines may limit the availability and energy of your work group. At the same time, the group may face new responsibilities--caring for its own members, and facilitating community recovery. Besides meeting customers' special needs for assistance following a disaster, personnel are often called on to support local authorities in providing community services. The following can help you structure your response. Much of the human suffering associated with a disaster happens after the event itself, and can be mitigated by effective management.

Take care of your people first. First locate your staff and assure that they and their families have necessary medical care, housing, food, and other necessities so they can be effective in the workplace. This task will be easier if you have planned for it in advance. Modify office rules and procedures that are counterproductive after a disaster. Dress codes, rules about children in the office, and restrictions on using telephones for personal business, for example, may need to be adjusted in the post-disaster period.

Take steps to prevent accidents and illness. Review the workplace for physical risks recognizing that attention and energy will be less than usual. Reinstate training for emergency response and communications for help. People who are exhausted often forget to take necessary steps to prevent injury and illness. Reminders and retraining can be valuable.

Prevent overwork and exhaustion. After an initial crisis period during which overwork may be necessary, develop procedures to assure that employees do not work too many hours without rest. It is particularly important to prevent the overwork and exhaustion that can occur as people throw themselves into disaster recovery operations, because exhaustion raises the risk of accidents in the already dangerous post-disaster environment. Exhaustion and lack of sleep can decrease alertness, impair judgment, and make people more vulnerable to accidents. Establish work and rest times. Rest is best when it is away from work unless safety at work is greater.

Attempt to provide adequate staffing for all new responsibilities created after the disaster, and for usual responsibilities that become more demanding as a result of the disaster. Prior planning and cross-training can make a big difference. Set clear priorities, including identifying work that simply will not be done in the short term. Be sure that no employee has an essential task that no one else knows how to do, or that person will surely be overworked.

Train managers to monitor their subordinates. Ensure that none are working excessive hours, and check for signs of exhaustion. In stressful times, leaders and highly dedicated employees are more likely to overwork than other personnel. It may seem ironic, but senior leaders need, after a disaster, to pay more attention to the conscientious individuals who normally need the least supervisory attention. Point out to subordinate leaders that they need to model healthy behaviors; this will help them monitor their own tendencies to overwork.

Encourage and facilitate healthy, safe behavior. Remind employees of the importance of getting adequate sleep and rest, drinking enough water, and taking whatever precautions are necessary in the environment. Pay close attention to information from local public health officials, since risks may change as the situation develops.

Do not only tell people what to do; make it easy for them to do it. Provide safe drinking water and remind employees to drink water regularly. It is not uncommon to become dehydrated under stress. If your building's water supply is unsafe, don't just tell people not to drink it. Physically block water fountains with tape, cardboard, etc., and post prominent signs above washbasins. Getting a quick drink of water is such an automatic behavior that people will forget to change their habits without an immediate, vivid reminder.

Avoid unnecessary travel. When travel is necessary, try to organize carpools with a well rested driver who knows the area rather than sending each employee off alone. Consider alternative work arrangements that can reduce the time employees spend commuting.

Most people are resilient and will recover from their traumatic experiences. To facilitate the recovery process, survivors of disasters often need to talk about what they have gone through, compare their reactions with those of others, exchange information, and provide one another with support and consolation. The most effective way is usually to make it easy for people do it when they feel ready, not to pressure them to talk about the traumatic situation at a time when they feel the need to be silent.

Provide an informal break area where employees can gather for snacks or lunch and spend a little time talking with their co-workers. Whenever possible, try to keep existing work groups together to build on the strength of existing ties among co-workers. If an employee must be deployed alone or with strangers, find a way for them to communicate with the larger organization, get information about how their co-workers are faring, and be assured they are still part of the group. Visits by management to the site of deployment can help improve morale.

If you have a mental health caregiver such as an Employee Assistance Professional (EAP), **make that person available in an informal way** to talk with employees where they work. Most people will not need extensive personal counseling, but will appreciate information and advice about issues such as how to deal with their children's reactions to the disaster. A few people may need more extensive mental health assistance. EAPS are traditionally well informed and resourceful about locating professional care for those who need it.

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
Uniformed Services University School of Medicine
www.usuhs.mil/csts
301 295-3293

CSTS is the academic arm and a partnering Center of the Defense Centers of Excellence (DCoE) for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury.