

# Acknowledging Public Tragedy Within Your Workplace



We are collectively witnessing more tragic events up close than ever before. Events such as natural disasters, catastrophic accidents or acts of large-scale violence have always happened, but as a result of technology that connects us faster and to more people, our exposure to these events has become more acute. While there is no perfect one-size-fits-all workplace response to a tragic event, there are a few things you can do to help prepare your organizational response.

One of the first challenges you will face when a public tragedy is felt within your workplace is to determine how your organization will acknowledge the events. Acknowledging a public tragedy may seem like a simple act but because it must be undertaken at the most sensitive and confusing of times it can be difficult to coordinate a response that is appropriate and tactful.

## **1) Determine Your Connection To The Tragedy**

It may not be easy to ascertain if the tragedy involves people or businesses directly tied to your organization, but it is important to consider this first: A direct connection could involve a former or current employee or a business connection through a company, customer or vendor.

In 2013 when garment workers were killed in the collapse of a building in Bangladesh, Canadian grocery retailer Loblaw's publically acknowledged their products were made by those garment workers.

***Give Your Managers Something To Do:*** Ask your managers to determine if they are aware of any direct connections to a tragedy. This provides you with information and also provides them something tangible to do. In times of tragedy, having a task can help employees maintain their composure.

## **2) Have Leadership Communicate Privately**

Leadership is important during difficult times. When individual employees are connected to the tragedy, it is best to have a leader speak personally and directly to these employees. This leader could be a senior company wide leader, a departmental or even a team leader. If your organization is large or scattered it may be necessary

to have the leader communicate through a personal message shared over video or read by local organization leaders.

In any message, include brief details about the connection, offering a personal condolence as well as an organizational one. Once key members of your organization have been notified privately you may then reveal this connection publically.

### **3 layers in the communication process**

- Speak first to those who lead or supervise individuals or individual teams most closely connected to the tragedy
- Speak next to the employees directly connected to the tragedy
- Then communicate personally with the full organization

### **3) Communicate Publically**

There are times when you may choose to publically acknowledge a connection. This will be a very individual decision and is not necessarily required. However, it can be helpful as part of the public grieving process if you join the community by acknowledging your connection. A simple acknowledgement of a direct connection posted in a public area or website or shared in a news release may be appropriate. Include a brief personal message expressing your concerns, care and support to those involved in the tragedy and if you choose, include information about the direct connection to your organization.

***Allow Others To Join Your Acknowledgement:*** You may include an opportunity for others to join you in your response, for example a public card (both a physical card and an electronic one) that allows people (your employees, customers or the public) to add their name and brief comments may be an option.

### **4) Offer A Simple Message**

Sometimes the best acknowledgements are simple but meaningful. A brief message on your website or posted in the office that offers condolences on behalf of the organization may be enough. Even the simplest of messages can help begin the healing process, for example the word 'Boston' or 'Boston We are Thinking of You' following the events at the Boston marathon could have been cathartic. Following the school shooting at Sandy Hook some schools in Canada choose to fly their flags at half-mast, a simple and silent acknowledgement of their feelings of connection and support.

These acknowledgements do not need to stay up for a long time, a few days connects your organization to the public grieving process. You may find after the event has been resolved or at the conclusion of public services tied to the event are appropriate opportunities to end your public message. Consider 5-10 days for a public acknowledgement as a reasonable guideline. However, if your organization was closely tied you may consider a different longer-term acknowledgement. This could include a offering a donation, creating scholarship or memorial fund or holding a future event to acknowledge the impact on your organization.

### **Bottom Line**

Showing strong organizational leadership and composure in the early hours and days after a tragedy can help your employees. A coordinated and appropriate acknowledgement of a tragedy and your connection to a tragedy can help your employees and community begin to address their feelings associated with the tragedy.