Help Your Employees Begin to Deal with a Tragedy



When a public event evokes a strong emotional response it can be difficult to manage the reactions of your employees. Because people react differently it can be difficult to orchestrate a workplace response that respects all individual needs.

Often our emotions and the constant coverage associated with tragic events causes many to act outside of their normal patterns of behavior creating problems within the workplace. Emotions left unaddressed can become obstacles to coping and returning to productivity. Although you may not be able to address each individual reaction there are some things you can implement following traumatic public events.

1) Recognize that People Respond Differently

According to Michael Craig Miller, M.D., editor-in-chief of the Harvard Mental Health Letter, writing in the 2011 article 'Does Everyone Need Psychological Help After a Tragic Event' not all people need the same support after a experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event.

Some Want to Talk but Not Everyone

In response to a tragedy some people ask questions and talk, seeking to understand and share feelings as they process events. But the more people talk the more the events can weigh on them and the more vulnerability they experience. This dichotomy can create a challenge for organizations as they try to determine how to manage the emotions of their employees.

During an event and in the hours that follow it is difficult to turn away from the news, but doing so can be healthy. You do not want to ask people not to discuss an event but you want to communicate there is a time, place and way to do it in a healthy manner.

Turn Down and Centralize the News

Turn off the news, radio and television in multiple spaces and select one location and one person to gather and share information. Select a location to discuss the events, a conference room, employee lounge or office and let people know you will be providing information there. Generally you want to select a private location that is not tied to a place you meet your customers. Help people feel invited and comforted

by providing food, information on options for seeking help and a person to talk with. You can also email or post information on an internal web page or social network for those who do not want to be around other people.

2) Provide Opportunities for Response and Action

Some People Want To Help or Get Involved, but Not Everyone Will

Provide people with the opportunity to help or take action if they choose. Consider the nature of the tragedy as a guide to action. For example organizing a clothing or food drive after a natural disaster may help people feel involved. Seek a local organization that would benefit from your participation or support and let your employees volunteer if they are interested. You do not need to take actions immediately, focus on the process of identifying and then organizing possible actions down the road. Inform your employees you are taking these steps and tell them clearly how they can become involved when they are ready.

Taking the time to identify a few simple options for acknowledging people’s emotions during times of tragedy can be an important component of ensuring your workplace your employees feel supported and are able to move forward.