



North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW)
PO Box 121; Botsford, CT 06404 *** Phone/Fax (tollfree): 888.426.4712
Email: info@nacsww.org *** Website: <http://www.nacsww.org>

"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

LEADING EMPLOYEES THROUGH CRISIS

Bob VandePol

**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2005
October, 2005
Grand Rapids, Michigan**

When tragedy strikes a business, all stakeholders immediately look to its leadership for direction. How leaders respond during the first hours after a disaster offers both tremendous opportunity and serious risk for the subsequent outcomes. That positive or negative response will echo throughout the organization's management strata, as junior managers take their cue from the charted direction. In retrospect, business leaders often pinpoint a workplace tragedy (violence, catastrophic accident, robbery, employee fatality, terrorism) as pivotal to the ongoing productivity of their work teams. Some identify how the incident launched a new sense of loyalty, community, and commitment to excellence. Others bemoan the event as triggering a collective negative image, increased conflict, and distrust of leadership. Whereas effective leadership manages these risks by addressing the "psychological undercurrent" beneath them, not all business leaders have the training or expertise to do so.

Leaders must be prepared to present that rare combination of compassion and competence — not mutually exclusive terms. Individually and organizationally, recovery is facilitated when a visible leader can acknowledge the personal impact upon involved people while at the same time transitioning them to next steps. The leader must embody and communicate the transitions from chaos to structure and helplessness to effective action. Those watching must witness a confident, competent person who doesn't minimize the effect of the disaster but communicates an expectation of recovery.

Leadership at Risk

Trust of leadership and a desirable corporate culture are at risk following a traumatic incident. A dynamic common to work groups following an event is increased "we/they"

thinking and blaming of "administration" for problems related and unrelated to the incident. People impacted by trauma predictably tend to:

1. Regress to more basic, primitive impulses and defenses

- The brain is re-circuited toward use of functions focused upon creating an immediate sense of safety. These thought patterns are not necessarily logical, as the portions of the brain dealing with advanced abstract thought are "put on hold."
- Decisions tend to be impulsive, extreme, and based more on emotion than logic.
- Emotional responses are magnified and self-protective.

2. Immediately attempt to make sense of the incident in an effort to gain a feeling of control over it

- The belief is that if one can understand the incident, he or she can be safer by preventing it next time.
- When the answer to "why" isn't available, people will create one.
- The understanding is likely to be reactive and lack objectivity.

3. Isolate from others

- The lack of control experienced in the tragedy leads people to pull away from others in distrust.

Add these factors together and conditions are ripe for hostility and blame, with the company's leadership positioned as the most convenient target. Following tragedy, the allegations of blame need not be accurate to be powerfully destructive.

The incident and its aftermath will not go away if ignored. Work groups will go through a reactive process — with leadership or without it. If ignored, the employees feel as though insult was just added to injury, and feelings of betrayal further fuel the likelihood of blame. According to Gerry Spence, founder of the Trial Lawyers College, "The pure rage that stems from unredressed injury can be more fearsome than that produced by the original wrong."

The ACT Model

The ACT model provides business leaders with a structured process to facilitate both individual and organizational recovery:

1. *Acknowledge* and name the trauma.

- Have an accurate understanding of the facts and avoid conjecture.
- Demonstrate the courage to use real language that specifically names what occurred. When there has been a fatality it is important to use the word "death."

- Acknowledge that the incident has an impact on team members and that individuals will be impacted differently.
- Personally acknowledge the trauma in order to position leadership as also being impacted by the event, thereby aligning leaders with other employees.

2. *Communicate* compassion and competence.

- Understand the compassion and competence are not mutually exclusive and must both be present to productively lead a traumatized group.
- Seek the support of a colleague, EAP consultant, or Critical Incident Response expert to help script a response and provide coaching/feedback.
- Have a crisis response plan that includes use of Critical Incident Response mental health professionals. These experts can help design the response plan and deliver structured interventions to mitigate the effects of trauma. Inherently, exercising this plan communicates compassion and competence.

3. *Transition*.

- Communicate an expectation of recovery. Those impacted must gain a vision of "survivor" rather than "victim."
- Communicate flexible and reasonable accommodations as people progress back to "return to work" and "return to life" normalcy. Employees should not be expected to immediately function at full productivity, but will recover more quickly if assigned to concrete tasks. Structure and focus are helpful. Extended time away from work often inhibits recovery. ("If you fall off a horse ... get back on a pony.")
- Lead visibly for several days and be especially accessible to employees for support and information.
- De-stigmatize and encourage the use of Critical Incident Response services.

When business leaders manage the risk of a traumatic event via the above process, they speed individual and organizational recovery and gain greater likelihood employees will positively view their involvement. Tragedy needn't lead to additional tragedy.

About the Author

Bob VandePol serves as president of Crisis Care Network, a provider of Critical Incident Response services to business and industry. He has trained and consulted with corporations, insurers, EAPs, schools, clinical groups, and other organizations regarding how to prevent and respond to trauma and violence. He has published and been quoted in clinical and business-related periodicals, co-authored a chapter in Jane's Information Group's Workplace Security Handbook, and was featured in the video training series Critical Incident Response. He is a Board Certified Expert in Traumatic Stress and Diplomate in the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress