

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black blazer over a white collared shirt and light blue jeans, is sitting in a library. She has a thoughtful or concerned expression. In the foreground, the profile of another woman with glasses is visible, looking towards the woman in the background. Bookshelves filled with books are visible in the background.

The importance of managing human factors during a workplace crisis



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During an expansion construction project at a manufacturing facility, a masonry wall collapses killing two employees and seriously injuring three more. This tragedy occurred near the main production area, where nearly all of the shift workers witnessed the incident and several were engaged in rescue efforts. As a company manager, what would be one of the first calls you would make?

An accident of this magnitude obviously has many tangible financial implications including hospitalization costs, accidental death and dismemberment (AD&D) claims, workers' compensation claims, potential litigation and regulatory penalties, demolition and clean up, and reconstruction costs, just to name a few. Naturally, calls to the insurance agent/broker and carrier, as well as corporate legal counsel are likely the first ones made. However, one of the biggest risks a manufacturing firm faces in this kind of situation is the shorter-term and lingering emotional impact to its workers that can result in lower productivity, higher absenteeism and workforce turnover.

According to a report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the manufacturing industry in 2009 experienced more than 125,000 workplace injuries.¹ More than half of these cases were of a serious nature that caused the employee to miss days away from work, change jobs or be restricted from certain activities on the job. In addition, the BLS reports that more than 300 fatalities occurred in the manufacturing industry in 2009.

While many of these types of incidents elicit a standard and straightforward response, certain types of incidents have characteristics that warrant an elevated or escalated response. So-called critical incidents are more disruptive to organizations and can disrupt organizational productivity and affect employees' emotional well-being.

Representative examples of critical incidents include:

- Workplace fatalities
- Multiple-injury accidents
- Tragic injuries with graphic wounds or agonizing pain and suffering, where survivors are shocked, stressed or traumatized by what they witnessed
- "Near death" incidents (such as employees crushed by falling objects or equipment, electrical shocks or major burns, structural collapses, explosions, employees suspended from fall arrest systems)
- Crashes that result in severely disabling injuries or fatalities
- Workplace violence among coworkers or a case of domestic abuse spilling over into the workplace
- Employee suicide
- Loss of a coworker due to a heart attack or other natural causes

In the aftermath of these critical incidents, companies are at risk of severe organizational chaos and distress. Leaders, managers and employees alike are left with the task of picking up the pieces and trying to answer some key questions:

¹ United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Workplace Injuries and Illnesses 2009, October 2010. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/osh.nr0.htm>

- Why did this happen?
- What went wrong?
- How did this happen?
- What could we have done differently?
- What does this mean to our company?
- What do we do next?
- What do I do next?

“A crisis management plan with an established protocol for critical incident response can help restore leadership in these times of crisis.”

This response is as predictable as it is normal. In the face of such an organizational crisis, leaders are charged with the responsibility of restoring normalcy (or as close as can be restored). Critical incidents are unsettling, uncomfortable and unfamiliar situations. A crisis management plan with an established protocol for critical incident response can help restore leadership in these times of crisis.

The impact of a critical incident on employees’ emotional well-being

You just received a frantic call from an administrative assistant at your manufacturing plant. Less than an hour ago, the estranged husband of an employee squealed his car into the parking lot. In front of several co-workers, the husband shot and killed his wife and sprayed bullets at the witnesses as they dove under their vehicles. The husband then strode into the building lobby and shot his wife’s fellow employee and boyfriend, while threatening the clerical staff and then running to his car while wildly firing shots at those huddled in the parking lot. He drove erratically around the lot because security had blockaded the exit. Finding himself trapped, the husband climbed out of his car and shot himself.

Critical incidents like this one are sudden, unexpected, often life-threatening and time-limited events that can impair employees’ capacity to respond in a healthy manner. Some employees experience recurrent and negative images such as nightmares or flashbacks, while others face emotions such as persistent fear, displaced anger, guilt and isolation. Extreme critical incident stressors can even result in personal crises, traumatic stress and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The human toll of a critical incident can be disruptive to business and workplace operations. Research shows that productivity, quality of work, profitability and other key performance measures can be adversely affected by such events.²

Addressing the organizational chaos and emotional aftermath through Critical Incident Response (CIR)

The following example shows how Critical Incident Response (CIR) may apply to a tragic event.

Each morning, the shift leader in a metal stamping plant was responsible to key in a cutting machine so that it could be run by either one or two operators. If two

² VandePol, R., and Beyer, C.E. (2009, Sept/Oct). Crisis management: The critical human element. Construction Financial Management Association, *Building Profits* 10-17

operators were working, both employees needed to hit buttons simultaneously before a sharp blade sliced through the metal part. Tragically, immediately following a contentious early morning management meeting, the shift leader missed one machine. The machinist then pushed her button and the machine horribly dismembered her co-worker and best friend. The accident victim was the single mother of two young children. The gruesome nature of the accident horrified the production team and most refused to return to the site.

The management of the plant immediately called in crisis response specialists. These specialists recommended closing the plant for the day and counseled both teams and individuals in the first 24 hours. Sessions were provided both on- and off-site where they reviewed coping strategies and offered support for employees. The shift leader received individual counseling to help deal with that person's own guilt as well as potential blame and aggression from the employees.

In the midst of a workplace crisis where multiple issues including medical, operational and logistical must be handled, paying attention to the human needs cannot be overlooked. That's why many manufacturing organizations are incorporating CIR into their crisis management plan.

CIR is a comprehensive, crisis intervention approach for addressing the human emotional factors aspects of critical incidents. Sometimes referred to as "psychological first aid" or critical incident debriefing, CIR is designed to reduce acute distress following an extreme event, encourage short- and long-term employee functioning, and facilitate both employee and organizational resiliency.

While CIR services are sometimes offered through a company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP), organizations both with and without EAP services can choose to contract CIR Specialists who are available to be on-site within several hours following a critical incident. These specialists are typically professional psychologists who can help manage the structure of the response in a way that is sensitive to the company's corporate culture, leadership structure and business objectives.

The CIR Specialist provides a safe, directed environment in order to help businesses address the following post-crisis needs:

- Position the company's leadership favorably
- Let people talk if they wish to do so
- Identify normal reactions to an abnormal event so that people don't panic regarding their own reactions
- Build group support
- Outline self-help recovery strategies
- Brainstorm solutions to overcome immediate return-to-work and return-to-life obstacles
- Triage movement toward either immediate business-as-usual functioning or additional care

"CIR is a comprehensive, crisis intervention approach for addressing the human emotional factors aspects of critical incidents."

CIR Specialists have different training, skill sets and personality requirements than traditional behavioral health professionals. When choosing a CIR Specialist, organizations should look for fully licensed master and doctoral level professionals with specific training in workplace crisis response and strategies for Stay-At-Work and Return-To-Work. They should also possess a level of business acumen in order to understand organizational objectives and corporate culture nuances that are critical to any CIR success.

The business case for Critical Incident Response

Providing the services of a CIR program is not only the right thing to do in a crisis, but it also is good for business in terms of better financial outcomes. These include reduced worker health care costs, lower disability claim costs, reduced workers' compensation claim costs, less absenteeism and a higher number of employees who can successfully return to work from being on disability after experiencing a traumatic event.

For example, a recent study found significant cost savings in workers' compensation cases over a 10-year period when using a psychological approach to treatment.³ The findings showed that workers' compensation costs were reduced over a multiyear period by using a small network of clinically skilled health care providers. These professionals addressed individual workers' psychological as well as physical needs.

The business outcomes were dramatic: frequency of lost-time claims decreased over the 10 years by 73%, the rate of medical claims decreased 61%, the number of days paid per claim decreased 77%, and total workers' compensation expenses including all medical, indemnity and administrative, decreased 54%.⁴

Human and financial consequences of a workplace crisis ⁵

Human consequences	Financial consequences
Increased absenteeism	Workforce turnover
Increased presenteeism and reduced productivity	Increase in workers' compensation claims
Increased medical, legal and psychiatric costs	Recruiting challenges
Long-term help for chronic "non-related" ailments such as anxiety and stress	Reduced customer service
Increased conflict among employees	Reputational damage
Increased use of drugs and alcohol	Litigation
Elevated fear and anxiety among employees	Inability to meet contractual deadlines

³ VandePol, R, and Attridge, Mark, The Business Case for Workplace Critical Incident Response: A Literature Review and Some Employer Examples, *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health*, 25:132–145, 2010

⁴ Bernacki, E. J., & Tsai, S. P. (2003). Ten years' experience using integrated workers' compensation management system to control workers' compensation costs. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 45(5), 508–516. doi:10.1097=01.jom.0000063629.37065.0c

⁵ VandePol, R., and Beyer, C.E. (2009, Sept/Oct). Crisis management: The critical human element. *Construction Financial Management Association, Building Profits* 10-17

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Integrating Critical Incident Response into a crisis management plan

No matter how well your risk management program has served the organization in avoiding a crisis to date, few companies can escape an extreme event at some point in time. Effective crisis management is a proactive planning process that includes identifying a stable of strong practitioners in public relations, media management and crisis communications, litigation management and critical incident response.

Crisis management needs assessment

Here are some questions to help assess if your organization has an effective crisis management plan in place:

- Does your company have a formal, written crisis management and response plan?
- Has this plan been disseminated to all supervisory personnel in your company?
- Does your company have a designated spokesperson to coordinate all contact with the media and other external third parties?
- Has the designated spokesperson received training on how to communicate with the media, including videotaping of practice emergency communications?
- Have key emergency contact numbers been posted throughout the company in prominent locations?
- Have all employees been trained on the crisis management plan?
- When was the last formal update completed for your plan?
- Has your company conducted tests or drills on this plan?
- Has your company developed protocols for communicating with customers, suppliers, employees, business partners and other stakeholders on a timely basis?

Crisis management planning: Immediate next steps

While assessing your organization's crisis management plans, here are some immediate next steps you can take:

1. Review risk management and insurance coverage

- Does your company have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP)?
- Does your EAP include CIR services?
- What services are available from your Group Health or AD&D and other insurance programs or coverages?
- Do you have coverage to help employees who are traveling internationally and experience a crisis?

2. Institute a planning team or task force

- An interdisciplinary approach works best at coordinating a timely and effective CIR.
- If your company does not have a crisis management plan or has not developed protocols for CIR, creating a task force to tackle the process is a good approach.

- If your company does have a plan with policies and protocols for CIR, then a team approach can be effective at conducting and evaluating drills of these plans to identify vulnerabilities and institute corrective actions.

3. Assess your company's vulnerability to a crisis

- Determine potential scenarios or threats and identify which types of critical incidents your company is vulnerable to experiencing.
- Assess the expected frequency of likely scenarios.
- Quantify the likely vs. worst-case scenarios.
- Prioritize the types of events to be prepared for.
- Develop plans to outline the steps to take in each of the most vulnerable types of critical incidents.

4. Inventory existing internal resources

- Does your company have employee telephone trees for initiating emergency notification?
- Are employees trained in first aid and CPR?
- Does your company have first aid kits and automatic electronic defibrillators (AEDs) available and have employees been trained in their use?
- Does your company have employees with multilingual skills or sign language to help with translation in an emergency?
- Has your company posted updated evacuation procedures?
- Has your company identified a centralized meeting place outside the sphere of danger to congregate in an evacuation?

5. Determine available external resources

- Request a list of local public safety and emergency responders and determine if training is available to help employees distinguish between routine first aid cases and when emergency (911) calls are to be made.
- Maintain a current list of key contacts with phone and email contact information at the insurance agent/broker, EAP and insurance company.
- Identify community-based organizations that may have resources and provide emergency response services.
- Determine the need for external support from crisis communications and media relations personnel and a CIR service provider.

During the stress and shock following a critical incident, people can make poor decisions – whether it's a manager providing confusing or insensitive information or an employee acting out in a way that can harm the productivity of the team or company. What leaders do in the first minutes and hours after an incident can determine how quickly the organization recovers both financially and emotionally. Making a company strong and whole again is what an effective Critical Incident Response is all about.

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