



Management Response to Critical Incidents

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Critical incidents can come in many forms including but not limited to incidents where life is threatened, accidents resulting in serious injury, terrifying or threatening events, natural disasters or incidents resulting in death. Critical incidents can be shocking and are outside the usual range of human experiences and normal levels of resilience are not necessarily enough to help those affected.

Being exposed to a critical or traumatic event can have a significant impact on an individual's emotional state. Everyone is different and normal people can react very strongly when confronted with a significant abnormal event. This can be surprising and worrying for people who usually see themselves as resilient. It is also important to understand that there may be different

emotional responses in people who have experienced the same event.

Resilience helps us recover from life's stressor however, in the event of significant trauma individuals are likely to need extra assistance and time to recover. If a strong emotional reaction to an event is not adequately addressed, ongoing and growing conditions can result such as anxiety, depression and post traumatic stress. The good news is that most normal adults can recover if the right support is presented and the individual affected takes positive proactive steps to manage their own condition.

Traumatic events can happen while at work or outside the workplace. Regardless of the connection to the workplace, the experience will potentially affect the employee/s and their ability to function normally at work. This is why organisations need to be aware of any significant employee experiences and address them accordingly.

Organisational wellbeing response to critical incidents or traumatic events.

Addressing the wellbeing of employees will be a top priority after a critical incident. It is vitally important that organisations respond to the issue with an appropriate sense of urgency and attention. Leaders and managers must be seen to be informed and responding appropriately to address immediate concerns of not only those directly involved but also the broader workforce and perhaps even customers and the community.

At these times, confidence in leadership is key and it is advisable that senior management work together to develop the right level of response. An ideal organisational response will be led by wellbeing concerns and help to manage strong emotions, misinformation and confusion. For example, organisations may need to consider

- ✔ What information should be communicated about the issue
- ✔ Who should issue the communication (usually the most senior individual in the organisation)
- ✔ How information should be communicated
- ✔ Any direct personal communication that may be required
- ✔ Follow up communication and timelines
- ✔ A clear offer of help and practical support

What can managers do to help after a critical incident or traumatic event?

Managers and leaders have special responsibilities in times of crisis and critical events. People will look to you for direction and information, regardless



of whether you have been personally affected by the incident. While a manager may feel uncomfortable, ill prepared or that 'its someone else's department' this is not a time to step back. Getting involved, informed and communicating to your employees is required. You don't have to be perfect, just do your informed best.

On a personal level, a manager should proactively approach individuals and groups affected by the event. Here are some tips:

- ✔ Accept that the person/s may be feeling significant emotional effects and be prepared to be empathetic and supportive.
- ✔ Approach the person in a private situation and let them know that you are aware of the event/situation. Ask them if they are ok.
- ✔ Listen quietly and avoid giving your opinion or "solution". Show empathy by acknowledging their experiences and feelings. Ask them what kind of help they would like from you. Be prepared for some open dialogue and take the time to patiently listen to all they have to say.



- ✔ Remind the person of the kinds of support offered to employees by the organisation – such as counselling, leave provisions, flexible work options – to help them through.
- ✔ Understand that they may not be prepared to talk or accept help when you approach them and let them know that you will check back with them later – make sure you follow up.
- ✔ Be aware that the person may be emotional and behave in ways that are out of character or exaggerated. For example they may become teary, angry or frustrated in situations that do not normally upset them. Give them some room and time.
- ✔ Accept that it may take a long period for a person to recover from the traumatic event. Be prepared to check in with the person in the following weeks and months particularly if ongoing support had been deployed or emotions appear to have resurfaced.

- ✔ As time goes by and you continue to check in, talk to the person about issues other than the incident (such as other general workplace events, happy events, holidays and positive news). This way your communication and relationship will grow or return to being about life's normalities rather than overshadowed by the traumatic event.

On a broader management level, managers will need to undertake the operational 'housekeeping' that will need to be followed up. . Lack of timely follow through with formalities and communication can be a significant source of stress for employees involved in traumatic events.

For example:

- ✔ Ensure the whole of workforce receive communication reiterating the resources available from their workplace – for example, counselling, flexible hours or leave provisions. If counselling is not already available you may need to engage a local provider for a period to be on call to support employees.
- ✔ Arrange requested/approved assistance promptly. If the event was a workplace incident you may, for example, consider options such as moving the employee away from the incident site or arrange for them to avoid the task/area for a period.
- ✔ If the incident was related to the workplace, managers should follow up and confirm that any short and long term safety provisions are implemented, incident reports are completed, operational issues are addressed, paperwork completed and WorkCover issues are finalised and appropriately communicated.