DEALING WITH A DISASTER THAT AFFECTS YOUR COMPANY

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As Hurricane Ike battered the Southern Coast of the United States, Southern California struggled to cope with the human-made disaster of the Metrolink train crash. At the same time, New Yorkers (as well as the rest of the country) remembered the catastrophic events of 9/11.

This past weekend, I viewed some short training videos from Crisis Care Network, one of the companies I consult for as a corporate crisis/grief counselor. I also read a newly published book titled, *The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes—and Why*, by Amanda Ripley (a fascinating read.) The combination of the news, the information from the videos, and the book made me realize the importance of spreading the word about what companies can do to minimize injuries and casualties during a disaster.

From the beginning of human life, people have had to cope with natural disasters. During the last two centuries, technology evolved that could also create human-made disasters. Now, it's more likely people will have to deal with a disaster than ever before.

When disasters occur, the expected relief, such as firefighters, police, or the military isn't immediately present, and actually may not be able to respond. The victims must initially find ways to rescue themselves.

A human-made or natural disaster forces people to think and act outside their knowledge base and training. Emotions can swamp their brain functions, rendering people unable to process what's happening, make a plan to escape, make quick decisions, and take decisive action.

During an accident or catastrophe, an individual's brain struggles to grasp what is happening by trying to form a *pattern* from his or her previous experiences (which may include movies, television, and books.) Yet often, a person has little life experience the brain can use to process the critical situation.

Most people react with shock and disbelief. Contrary to popular belief (and scenes from movies) most disasters don't initially cause a "mob mentality" where the group blindly flees for their lives.

Usually, people respond to trauma by shutting down. They don't move unless forcefully told to do so, or are physically helped. If they do move, they are often slow and docile, instead of quick and decisive.

In the Metrolink crash on Friday, one uninjured survivor hurried to help his fellow passengers, most of whom had some kind of injury. He reported having to tell them what to do. Even if only slightly injured, the victims remained in shock, and couldn't think on their own or even attempt to exit the train.

During a catastrophe, people move in groups or herds, remaining together for the sense of security the others (even if strangers) provide. They wait to be told what to do or to be rescued. They will follow inept or mistaken leaders rather than disagree with the group mentality or strike out on their own. You see this kind of behavior in movies. An authority figure leads people in the tragically wrong direction, while the hero and his small band of followers heads in a different way. (*The Poseidon Adventure* and *Day After Tomorrow* immediately come to mind.)

What This Means for Businesses

If employees are cut off from emergency services, they have to lead themselves. The leaders who emerge in a crisis are not necessarily the ones who lead in the normal office routine.

An organization (and the people within the organization) recovers from their shock and reacts more appropriately if they see their leadership being effective. To be successful, a leader(s) needs to show a grasp of the immediate logistics of the situation, as well as provide emotional support for the people involved.

A leader must try to make order out of chaos, first addressing safety and organizing help for the injured.

Effective leaders need to do several things.

1. **Remain calm.** Panic will only frighten everyone else.

2. **Calm those around them.** Firmly remind people to remain calm.

3. **Forcefully give orders.** This helps victims follow your commands, even those in shock.

4. **Stay aware of what's going on around them, rather than focus on one aspect of situation.** When highly stressed, people focus on one aspect of the problem instead of the "big picture." Training helps avoid this tendency toward tunnel vision.

5. **Convey a "we're all in this together" attitude.** Experiencing a disaster tends to make the victims feel isolated. Providing a sense of human connection is important.

6. **Be open to feedback from others.** Someone else may have more knowledge, training, or a better idea.

7. **Don't try to play down or minimize what has occurred**. This only makes people more anxious.

8. **Convey real and pertinent information as soon as possible.** This eases peoples' anxieties and avoids the spread of rumors.

Emergency Preparedness

People perform better under extreme stress if they *believe* they're competent to handle the situation. Part of confidence stems from an individual's personality, but the rest comes from mental and physical *training.*

The way the organization interacts *before* the crisis will make a difference *during* the crisis. If the company promotes innovative thinking, open communication, and support for one another during its normal operations, the employees will be more able to demonstrate them before, during, and after the disaster.

Disaster preparedness training is vital. People often react to a disaster that isn't immediately life threatening (within the next few seconds) by focusing on what they *can't* control, rather than what they *can.* People will respond better if they feel they know *what* to do and *how* to do it.

Give all employees, especially management, training in effective communication skills, including learning how to convey empathy and support. These skills are important in the day-to-day running of a successful company, but are also essential during times of crisis.

Companies should have a disaster preparedness plan encompassing possible regional disasters-- earthquake, tornados, and hurricanes, as well as national epidemics, such as a quick-acting virus. They should also plan for other *onsite* possibilities-- fire, explosion, car-though-the-front-plate-glass-window.

Companies don't often think about how an *offsite* calamity such as a major accident could affect them. Yet if one or more employees are involved (or suspected to be involved) the rest of the organization will experience distress.

In the Metrolink disaster, several companies had employees on board. One of these companies had a list of all the employees who'd purchased Metrolink passes in the last month. As soon as the human resource staff received news of the tragedy, they began calling each person on the list, using the phone numbers in the employee's personnel file. By making the phone calls, they accomplished a two-fold purpose. One, they were able to account for the safety of their employees. Two, they sent a strong message to the employees that the company cared about their wellbeing. (In the future, this company plans to elicit each employee's cell phone number when they purchase a monthly bus or Metrolink pass, to make it easier to contact them in case of a bus or train disaster.)

Every employee should be trained to follow the emergency plan, by having regular realistic drills where *everyone* is required to completely leave the building. Some possible training tips:

1. **Train everyone to immediately leave his or her work area.** Don't stop to gather possessions, shut down the computer, or make family phone calls.)

2. **Don't have one person per department who is responsible for knowing the plan.** If that person's out of the building, or he or she panics, everyone else needs to know what to do and where to go.

3. **Learn ALL exits.** Not all exits signs are easily seen during a crisis. Some stairwells may be blocked. Not all stairways go directly down to the street. Sometimes you have to wind through halls or rooms.

4. **For women, if wearing high heels, keep a pair of comfortable shoes at your desk.** You must be able to *slip* into them. Tennis shoes will take too much time to tie.

5. **Have cross-company training.** If you work in a high rise or other building with multiple companies, it will be even more effective to have your people trained in the same manner as those of the other companies.

One of the most effective ways to remain calm and focused is deep breathing. Called belly breathing in yoga, it's also taught as combat breathing in the military. I teach this kind of breathing when I give trainings on stress reduction.

The idea is to inhale deeply for a count of four, hold your breath for four, exhale for four, and then hold for four. Repeat. When doing this kind of breathing correctly, the stomach should expand when inhaling and contract when exhaling. (Some people do this backwards and need to be taught to correct their breathing.)

During a disaster, deep breathing will help keep people calm and centered. This will give them something they can control, even if they can't control (or believe that can't control) anything around them.

By being as prepared as possible, your organization will maximize its response to crisis and minimize injuries, deaths, and post-traumatic stress reactions.