

Take action following a critical incident

In the workplace, critical incidents can come in many forms – a death, injury, accident, assault or other act of violence, flood, fire, and even domestic abuse situations. And with trying economic times, increased lay-offs and reductions in force result in feelings of grief, loss, and anxiety associated with traumatic events.

Employees can be affected for day, weeks, or even months following a critical incident. When these after effects linger, employee morale, engagement and productivity can be negatively affected.

As a human resource (HR) professional or manager, you are in a position to coordinate an appropriate and compassionate response to the situation. Sometimes, as in the case of layoffs or staff reductions, this information is known ahead of time and a critical incident response can be coordinated with your employee assistance program (EAP) in anticipation of the event. However, traumatic events often occur without warning.

First steps

- Make sure everyone is safe and notify the appropriate entities as necessary. Call police, fire or security. Be sure to inform the appropriate personnel in your organization, such as HR, health and safety, designated trauma response coordinators and media relations.
- Call your EAP. Every crisis is different, and an EAP clinician will discuss the best ways to respond to an incident. When you call, you will need to do the following:
 - Describe the incident – who, what, when, where, why and how;
 - Describe the reactions of the employees and how your company has responded thus far and your anticipated needs;
 - Let the EAP clinician know if there are any other stressors complicating the current situation.
- Acknowledge that a critical incident has occurred. Being honest with employees and providing factual information will help stop rumors from spreading.
- Consider any legal implications before responding to the media or communicating to employees. Assign a spokesperson and instruct employees on how to respond to the media.

Employee responses

After a critical incident, employees may feel overwhelmed and display signs of stress. These symptoms can be mental, physical or emotional. Remember, different people will react in different ways. Some people may display emotional outbursts, while others may withdraw or appear numb. These reactions may occur immediately, be delayed, or even ongoing for a period of time.

Ease@Work can offer support to employees and managers throughout the stages of recovery and help people cope with feelings that are common after a traumatic event. An important part of the recovery process for employees is the availability of a professional with whom they can discuss the event and their reactions. By providing this critical incident support, you can help reduce the long-term effects of a traumatic event in your workplace.

Tips for managers during a layoff

While decisions about layoffs can be painful, after the layoff occurs, work still must carry on. Often, it's up to the managing supervisor to help remaining staff get back to being productive in the reorganized structure. Those remaining, the "survivors," may experience increased workloads, lower morale, increased job insecurity and increased health risks related to stress. So what can you do as a manager to assist these employees?

- Stay connected with employees through good communication.
- Allow time and space for emotions. Understand an employee may be having difficulty coping, but that doesn't mean they are resisting change.
- Engage in career development discussions.
- Help employees balance work and life.
- Meet with each person individually.
- Praise good work.
- Continue to lead.
- Listen to employees without judging.
- Emphasize the importance of self care and recommend the EAP.
- Notice if someone is having a particularly hard time and call Ease for a management consultation.



Addressing loss & grief

We know people! EASE@Work is connected to an extensive network of specialists who support the unique needs of Human Resources.

If you're not sure if we can help you with your needs, just ask!

Here's an example of how we can help:

A manager at Company ABC noticed that employees were not their "normal" selves following two deaths in their division. One employee who passed away had been ill for an extended period of time; the other employee died suddenly over a weekend. Both deaths occurred within about one month of each other.

Employees within the division had a history together and the nature of their work required they interact with co-workers often. The manager noticed a quieter tone about the group - that they were not as jovial with each other on breaks and in the lunch room. The manager also noticed that employees in the group as a whole had taken more sick time since the deaths. While productivity had not slowed, the manager was concerned about the employees and feared that many staff were still struggling with their co-workers' deaths.

The division manager and human resources director consulted with the Ease@Work clinician and determined that an on-site critical incident stress debriefing would be appropriate. While the deaths did not occur at work, nor were they the result of a work-related accident, employees were still traumatized from the loss of two co-workers in such a short period of time. An on-site group debriefing session would provide employees with the assurance that their feelings were normal and explain the stages of grief one goes through. Additionally, the clinician was able to provide some guidelines for how to better express their feelings through the mourning process and what they could do to help themselves and others around them.

This group session also allowed employees to meet the clinician and alleviate their fears about reaching out for counseling on their own. Following the group debriefing, a few individuals who worked most closely with the decedents called the EAP to schedule one-on-one confidential sessions.

Q: I have an employee who has a spouse that has been layed-off. I know this couple depended on both of their incomes in order to support their household and three minor children. Understandably, my employee has seemed more stressed lately. Is there anything I can do to help?

A: Absolutely. Your EAP can help in a variety of ways, however, your approach will depend on what you've noticed and documented at work. If your employee is still working up to the expected standards and performance is not an issue, then a "soft" (suggested) referral would be appropriate.

This would involve a private conversation where you express concern for your employee's well-being and remind him/her that the EAP has several programs that might be able to help during this time... everything from consultation with financial experts who would be able to discuss the specifics of their situation, to counselors who could help with stress management or any relationship issues that may be resulting from the change in work status. You would assure the employee that the EAP services are confidential and give them an Ease@Work wallet card with the contact information. It would then be up to the employee to decide if they wanted to call the EAP.

If your employee is not performing as required and you have documentation to that effect, then a management referral would be appropriate. Again, you would need to follow any established work policies regarding use of a referral to the EAP; documentation would need to be specific to the deficiencies in work performance; and you would then need to follow the Ease@Work management referral process.

And remember, if you have questions about whether a management referral is appropriate or not, your account manager or an Ease@Work clinician is available to consult with you on a case-by-case basis. Just call us at 216.241.3273 or 800.521.3273.

Remember... You're an HR Star!

The 2011 HR Star Conference will take place on Wednesday, July 20, 2011 from 9:00am – 4:30pm at the Holiday Inn-South, 6001 Rockside Road, Independence, Oh 44131. This year's event will once again feature a number of timely topics including sessions on Healthcare Reform, FMLA and ADA, Leadership Excellence, Performance Management, Wellness Programs, Diversity and Respect, Dealing with Difficult Employees, Workplace Bullying, Employee Engagement and Rebuilding Morale.

Registration is open. Go to <http://www.hrstarconference.com/cleveland> to register or to view a complete list of scheduled speakers and topics.



What have you missed at Interact@EASE?

Visit www.easeatwork.com and click on the "Visit our blog" link for the latest conversations about human resource, EAP and wellness-related topics.