



## **Managing in the Wake of Trauma**

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### **The Terrorization of America**

The terrorization of America has been shocking in its success. Each of us - even those who seem to be untouched by recent events - has had our basic sense of safety and security shattered. Threats to our survival have engendered overwhelming stress that will continue to influence us in a myriad of ways, ranging from the dramatic to the subtle, through the months and years ahead. Both in our personal lives and in the workplace, some aspects of our actions and reactions will reflect our experience on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Even as we gain some distance from that catastrophic day, there are new developments that remind us that we are at significant risk, vulnerable to physical attack and economic distress.

But not all of the impact has been negative. We have seen that trauma, although life shattering, can act as a tremendous catalyst, igniting passions to rebuild and heal. Out of our shared ordeal we have witnessed ourselves at our best. We stand united in a dramatic expression of solidarity and teamwork. "We, the people" seem determined to rebuild much more than we lost.

For many Americans, the workplace is where we most clearly face the struggle to rebuild and reengage with life. While most of us would like to get back to work and return to "normal", we may not know what that means in the present context, or how to get there. In the wake of such a crisis, people look to their leadership to provide a framework for recovery. Yet businesses cannot expect their leaders to understand the impact of traumatic stress on the human psyche, or to have the specialized skills to apply that knowledge to day-to-day management in the workplace.

This article offers a cognitive framework for understanding and integrating the impact of recent events on the workplace, and provides recommendations for specific actions that will allow managers at all levels to facilitate recovery. Managers who step up to this challenge will find that people are very willing to rely on their efforts, and that simple actions and processes often lead to success.

### **How Trauma has Impacted the Workplace**

We must begin by acknowledging the role trauma has played in the workplace. While we may wish that by some stroke of luck, leadership and world events, we will return to "business as usual" in a short time, daily events both at home and abroad will more likely continue to intrude into the work place, recreating a state of heightened

vulnerability. Although we may feel we have gotten beyond our initial reactions to terror, fear lies right beneath the surface. Our performance will be compromised for a period of time by our reactions - fear, preoccupation with safety, irritability, loss of focus, fatigue, forgetfulness, intrusion of images of the traumatic events into seemingly unrelated situations. In addition, our experiences at work have the potential for adding to our stress. Our reactions to being traumatized make each of us unusually vulnerable to the normal stresses of work life. During unstable times, our need for protection, predictability, and control are amplified; we react poorly to surprises, conflict, and confusion.

Yet work can serve as a powerful antidote to the impact of the emotional destruction inflicted by trauma. For us to survive acts of terror, both as a nation and as individuals, we must reengage life. By returning to our jobs, we demonstrate to ourselves and to others that we have not been overcome by the forces of terror: we are regaining our balance and participating fully in living.

### **The Importance of Engaged Leadership**

While most of us recognize the importance of returning to work for our recovery, we cannot afford to ignore the impact of continued traumatic stress on the work force. The challenge to management, then, is to integrate an understanding of the impact of trauma into their day-to-day activities. Managers at every level must work to provide employees with an environment that addresses their specific needs for safety, security, and predictability. They must learn to act in ways that facilitate the ability of stressed employees to return to work and be productive. Rather than attempt to revert to “business as usual”, they must identify and address issues that undermine employees’ reengagement. They may have to adjust their expectations and procedures to reflect the needs of people working under unusual conditions.

At the same time, managers have their normal deliverables and deadlines to meet. They may be uncertain about how to balance their business objectives with the special needs of their staff. They may lack the confidence in their ability to understand what their staff face and the skills to provide what their staff needs. Old standards, attitudes, and guidelines may not serve them well in the present situation.

What should managers do? They should remember that they and their staff are under the influence of traumatic stress. They should understand how people react to being traumatized. They should seek to create an environment that diminishes stress, while facilitating a return to productivity. They should remember that there are opportunities for growth and development even during these difficult times - maybe even because of them.

### **How People React to Trauma**

When we are traumatized, we often lose the ability to differentiate between the traumatic event and the rest of our lives. Aspects of our everyday lives can trigger reactions to past events, though we may be completely unaware of these subtle connections. Our actions, reactions, opinions, and feelings may be highly influenced by the trauma for months and years after the actual event. At times, events at work may provoke highly exaggerated responses because our natural defenses, our ability to control ourselves, and our tolerance for frustration and conflict, have all been eroded by the demands thrust upon us by living through acts of terror.

This difficulty discriminating between traumatic events and the rest of life, along with the ensuing depletion of emotional fortitude and stamina, can lead to the intrusion into the workplace of behaviors and feelings such as:

- Fear, insecurity, vulnerability, and a sense of being unprotected
- Hypersensitive reactions such as irritability, anger, sudden crying, strong emotions that seem out of context and/or exaggerated, and inability to find meaning in work
- Compromised cognitive functioning such as confusion, forgetfulness, loss of focus
- Increased somatic reactions to stress such as anxiety, gastrointestinal symptoms, heart palpitations, increased sickness, fatigue

People are further stressed by their inability to control their involuntary reactions to trauma. They may be thrown off balance by the peculiar feelings they are experiencing and feel threatened by their inability to regain a sense of normalcy. They may:

- Be critical, impatient and intolerant of the behavior and reactions of their colleagues, and even of their own reactions
- Deny that work behavior is being influenced by the traumatic events
- Feel guilty that they are unable - or able - to “get on with their lives”
- Feel angry that others can focus on work, or angry that others are unable to focus on work

## **What Managers Can Do**

### **1. Rise to the occasion and assume leadership.**

During times of crisis, people want and need leaders who take command, embrace the issues, bring order and a calming influence to chaotic and threatening times, and set a model for recovery.

- Acknowledge the impact of traumatic events on your own attempts to reengage with work.
- Share your feelings and thoughts at appropriate times.

- Make your staff aware that you care and are paying attention to how they are coping and functioning.
- Bring in good news, attend to the mundane aspects of life, and support the celebrations of group successes and personal milestones.
- Shift focus away from traumatic events to the projects and routines of work.

## **2. Provide reliable, timely information.**

Delivering accurate and timely communication is always a prerequisite to developing a secure, trusting, and empowered workforce. Particularly during times of crisis, people want immediate access to information about all events that have an impact on them. Knowledge is protection, while misinformation, widespread rumors, and unannounced surprises in the workplace all reinforce a sense of chaos and underlying feelings of anxiety. If anything, managers should try to over communicate during stressful periods.

- Announce the results of all elevator, building, and safety inspections.
- Avoid surprises by providing staff with detailed advance information about any upcoming organizational changes.
- Avoid periods of silence that may instill suspicion by communicating regularly, according to a fixed schedule.
- Develop a structure for communication of external events. In order to focus on work, people need to know that they can depend on receiving critical news about world events that they are missing when they are working. As necessary, set aside some time during the day or week for newsbreaks, during which you provide updates and announcements.

## **3. Create a secure and protected environment.**

People need to feel secure and protected in their work environment. When we are threatened, we are reminded of other times – particularly in childhood – when we felt unprotected, overwhelmed, and in danger. As we did when we were children, we want to know that leaders are attending to our needs. If there ever was a time for a strong, secure leader - one who makes the decision and sticks to it - the time is now.

- Be visible and accessible. Begin each day with a tour of the floor, checking in with all employees. Notice who appears stressed and who might need personalized attention.
- Respond proactively to employees in need by directing them to appropriate support services.
- Try to balance responsiveness to others with an ability to stick with decisions.
- Remind people that their behavior may reflect the stress they are under.

- Appreciate that team members will have a heightened sensitivity to threats to members of the team such as illness, possible termination, and other work stressors.

#### **4. Be predictable, dependable, and structured.**

One important component of a secure environment is predictability. Adhering to the standard rituals of corporate life - procedures, meetings, information sessions – offers reassurance that some aspect of life remains unchanged, dependable, and predictable.

- Maintain the normal structure of meetings, with a particular sensitivity to the negative impact of cancellations and suspensions of the "normal" rituals of the work week.

#### **5. Encourage individuals to follow their own path in responding to stress and recovery.**

People overcome stress and heal themselves in a variety of ways. Some need to talk a great deal and express their feelings, while others lose themselves in work and demonstrate that they can step away from feelings. Most of us will alternate between experiencing strong feelings and avoidance or numbing (the absence of feelings). A successful coping style is one that helps us to function well.

- Pay attention to how someone is functioning as a prime indicator of how they are responding to stress.
- Allow people the flexibility to set their own pace and blaze their own trail to recovery. Day to day, people vary greatly in their mood, degree of vulnerability, and attention to traumatic events.
- Encourage people to have confidence in their ability to determine what they need to do to regain a sense of self-control and balance.
- Respect individual boundaries and refrain from forcing people to follow a specified series of steps to recover. The rule is: “If it doesn’t feel right, don’t do it”.
- Provide opportunities to talk but recognize that some navigate traumatic events by not talking – there is no one “right way” to get from here to there. Relying on formulas that dictate how to respond to trauma and regain normalcy creates further stress.
- Model the essential elements of handling traumatic stress: acknowledge the impact of trauma on your own life; accept the bad days when you lack focus and energy, when the fears gain the upper hand and you are preoccupied with safety; and accept the good days when you embrace work and enjoy life.