7

Establishing the New Normal

After a major traumatic incident, everything can seem different. The world suddenly seems unsafe and unpredictable – and can continue to feel that way for some time to come. Your trust in people, relationships, God, government, institutions, environment, and the world can become a concern.

Your people are likely to feel this way in the aftermath of a disaster or situation that rocks their established senses of normalcy. The common sentiment is, "We can never go back to normal around here. Things will never be the same." This is natural enough. After all, they have been emotionally traumatized, they may be mourning, and they may be frightened. As a result, it's a good idea to avoid framing the task ahead as "getting back to normal." Instead, introduce the concept of establishing a "new normal," which builds in the recognition and acknowledgment of what has occurred while phasing back into productive work.

This chapter will help you to:

- ➢ *Prepare to lead your organization through a period of adjustment.*
- ➢ *Handle the first day back with sensitivity.*
- ➢ *Provide the psychological first aid for recovery.*
- ➢ *Support employees in returning to full productivity.*
- ➢ *Help your team to recognize and act upon the lessons-learned.*

7.1 It's Back to Work We Go

The good news is that people tend to be resilient. Just as we naturally overcome a common cold, people have coping mechanisms that allow them to return to a state of balance that is much the same as prior to the crisis situation. This is not to say that those who experience permanent losses will not experience difficult adjustments, such as surviving family members following the death of a loved one. They will. But, we know from experience that human beings in crisis are adaptable. Most people will recover, and the recovery process can be accelerated when management does the right things for impacted stakeholders.

The concept of a new normal is something people can understand and grasp emotionally. It can help them move forward. It removes the implication that they are being asked to act as if nothing has happened – as if Helen and Jack are still at their desks, or that irreplaceable historic building still stands, or those persons who lost limbs in the Boston Marathon bombing will be good as new. The new normal sets up the expectation that there may be some personal and organizational adjustments, but we will reestablish a sense of normalcy.

> The longer people stay out, isolated and brooding over what has happened, the more abnormal things will feel.

It's usually best to get people back to work as soon as possible after a traumatic workplace incident. There is nothing normal about staying home in recovery mode. People are more likely to become depressed, anxious, angry, and fixated on perceived harm when they "drop out." The longer people stay out, isolated and brooding over what has happened, the more abnormal things will feel. Getting people back to a work routine with organizational support, on the other hand, gives them an opportunity to process the experience together, in an organized way, which you can facilitate. It allows them to have accurate and timely information, too, which is essential to recovery.

This is not to say that you should ask people to conduct a regular workday immediately after a distressing experience. Instead, the first day back at work should be a day for "slaying the dragon" – confronting what happened by, for example, returning to the building where the incident occurred. Management should be highly visible on this day. Up-to-date information should be flowing in a caring and concerned manner. There should be clear acknowledgment of what has occurred, and structured opportunities for asking questions and venting the very difficult reactions that people will naturally be experiencing.

7.4 A Program for Recovery: Psychological First Aid

You owe it to impacted stakeholders, and to the continued health of your organization, to institute a structured program that facilitates recovery and the establishment of a new normal. In many cases, this may include crisis-experienced behavioral health assistance, an intentional "phasing" back into productive work and operations, ongoing monitoring, and a strategy for purposeful "disengagement" at the right time from the crisis intervention and response activities.

It is important for management to provide effective social support for traumatized stakeholders. People respond well to a psychological first aid (PFA) process that is widely used by organizations – corporate, public sector, and civic – in the early aftermath of an incident. Management's role in PFA can include providing impacted stakeholders with appropriate levels of practical assistance, physical comfort, and accurate information in the early aftermath of a distressing crisis. As appropriate, consider providing food as a gesture of corporate caring. A free lunch can be a simple way to demonstrate that the organization cares.

> No one should be coerced to "talk about" his or her experiences. Instead, positive coping strategies should be discussed individually or in groups

7.4.1 Traditional Psychological Debriefings Not Recommended

One common post-crisis practice has come into controversy. For years, employee assistance program (EAP) providers and other behavioral health professionals have provided psychological group debriefing sessions for employees and other impacted stakeholder groups. I use the term "psychological debriefing" to differentiate from the "operational debriefings" that we will discuss later. Commonly referred to as critical incident stress debriefings (CISD), these group sessions historically have included discussions regarding traumatized employees' experiences during the incident, reactions since the event, and traumatic stress symptoms that could emerge.

Unfortunately, the outcomes of these CISD group debriefings were not tested adequately prior to implementation. Recent research (Rose, Bisson, & Wessely, 2003) has concluded repeatedly that debriefing sessions (and their many workplace variations) can create a measurable increase in traumatic stress for some participants, whether delivered in individual, couples, or group sessions. One year following CISD sessions, a select few participants were found to have higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than nonparticipants. Yet, many behavioral health professionals continue the practice of CISD at the risk of harm to impacted people and liability exposures for companies they serve.

or banners up, establish a time to put them away. The point is to provide a timeline when everyone, symbolically, resumes regular activities. Meanwhile, management can continue to assess the wellbeing of the workforce and demonstrate corporate caring as the regular work routine resumes.

7.5.1 Supervisory Monitoring

Managers and supervisors have an extra role to play with their employees in the aftermath of a disaster, as the eyes and ears of your recovery and human support efforts. Since they know your employees best, they are in the position to recognize those who are having continued difficulty and evidencing distress. Let supervisors know that they should be alert for unusual behavior, and where to report their concerns about non-recovering employees. This is one way to identify employees who may need referral for further treatment, especially during the first month following a traumatic incident.

You should be aware that persons who continue to experience traumatic stress reactions for a month or more may meet the legally accepted diagnostic criteria for PTSD. By monitoring and treating employees who experience continuing stress reactions, you will be better able to avoid significant medical costs, formerly productive employees quitting, and lost productivity down the line.

Case Study:
Establishing a New Normal
Following a Mass Workplace Shooting

In 1989, Joseph Wesbecker worked for Standard Gravure, a newspaper printing company in Louisville, Kentucky, but had been on a one-year leave of absence for a stress-related illness. After 12 months, his disability payments stopped. Unannounced, he returned to the workplace and shot 21 people, killing 8. Because the company printed time-sensitive advertising for daily newspapers, there was a great need to reestablish a new normal as soon as possible. I was called into Standard Gravure that evening by senior management to expedite the recovery process. A crisis management team (CMT) was quickly established.

Paradoxically, the first step in reestablishing productivity was to shut down production. However, at my suggestion, management asked all employees to come to the worksite the day following the mass shooting for a full management briefing on the incident. Supervisors came in two hours prior to employees' arrival in order to plan out their role for the upcoming day. Management was to provide communications for all employees, to be delivered through the supervisors since no place was available within the factory that

was suitable for an all-employee meeting. Two-way communications were to be established through structured company-wide employee briefing meetings, provided by the supervisors. Additionally, supervisors were to identify employee needs and concerns, then relay that information back to the CMT.

Management greeted arriving employees. Supervisors provided up-to-date information. Employees were paid for unworked time the day of the shooting. Production for the day was minimized and customers were notified of the disruption. Media surrounded the building and employees were encouraged not to speak to any reporters, as the CEO had agreed to be the spokesperson for the company. Lunch was provided for employees as a gesture of caring. Security was established to stop media encroachment and provide a sense of safety. Crisis counseling groups and individual sessions were provided throughout the day. To facilitate the two-way communication process, anonymous questionnaires were distributed for employees to give direct feedback to senior management about their reactions, needs, and concerns.

The first day back, an employee crisis recovery committee was established to allow designated employees to gather information from co-workers and brainstorm solutions to problems and concerns. The committee had direct access to the CEO and executive VP of the company. Issues that were obtained and addressed included a company-sponsored memorial service at a local hotel ballroom for all employees and their families. Additionally, provisions were made for employees to attend funerals and to be paid if they attended during work hours.

Lessons-learned: Ultimately, the generosity of management, flexibility in meeting employee needs, and demonstrations of caring allowed the company to rapidly return to a full work schedule. Supervisors were briefed and instructed to monitor their employees for adjustment problems and deteriorating work performance. Those employees who needed additional assistance were provided confidential supportive assistance.

While the incident was devastating, a new normal was established and productivity resumed. The employee crisis recovery committee remained in place for months following, which served as an ongoing conduit of connectivity between management and the employees to ensure emerging problems didn't go unaddressed.