

WHEN GLOBAL CRISES AND NATURAL DISASTERS AFFECT YOUR COMPANY AND ROCK YOUR WORLD

WE'VE DEFINITELY SAVED THE BEST for last in terms of the challenges and crises that you and your organization might face from time to time. Think about it: pandemics, social unrest, economic crashes, or natural disasters can become reality at any time for any of us. What's your role when disruption creates a "new normal" in the workplace? More important, how do you develop a reputation for successful leadership when exceptionally stressful conditions beyond your control leave your employees lacking information, afraid for their or their families' health and safety, or worried about supply chain issues and other practical outcomes of severe disruption?

At the time of this writing alone in early 2023, the following trends were in play in organizations worldwide:

- Inflationary trends and a lingering possibility of recession.
- Mass layoffs affecting the tech, media and entertainment, banking, and other sectors.

- Supply chain problems, which the World Economic Forum said are being spurred by rising costs, labor unrest, energy shortages, geopolitical uncertainty, and extreme weather.
- Worker burnout. (Think of health-care workers working double shifts, sixth and seventh consecutive days, and excessive overtime.)
- The Great Resignation—the pandemic triggered a record-high exit of Americans from the workforce.
- Quiet quitting, which, according to the Gallup polling organization, affected almost half of American workers who drew “mental lines in the sand” in terms of what they were willing or not willing to do for their employer.

While we can't address every type of global event or natural disaster that can come your way, we can work together to build a leadership framework to formulate your response based on human emotional needs. And I do mean “work together” in this instance: every situation will be different, but the suggestions that follow can serve as a helpful baseline to customize solutions and move through the macro changes that come your way.

This isn't meant to be easy, but facing severe struggle helps you grow and evolve as a leader faster than just about anything else. And in that growth, you hone your character, your leadership mettle, and your definition of self. Is it a selfish or a selfless image that you want to portray? Do you see yourself putting others' needs ahead of your own or putting your own needs first? Are you a calming influence helping others focus on their priorities, or do you turn a blind eye to this new reality that's upended everything in your current line of sight? There's no judgment here. But it's important to give thought to who you are and who you choose to be relative to the overwhelming changes that may come your way in an instant and affect your organization, employees, family, or general sense of well-being.

First things first: when catastrophe strikes, tend to the health and safety of your team members immediately, including finding

a proper safe zone or shelter to shield yourselves from further harm. Second, listen to your senior management team and inform yourself of current priorities and resources, including the key message points that your organization wants all employees to follow and be aware of. Third, as the situation begins to normalize, ensure that employees and their families have access to food, water, and medical care, as needed. Fourth, as a stabilization phase comes into play, determine where work falls on the spectrum of family-safety-company and ensure that your employees understand that we're all in this together and that in times of crisis, we are all friends and neighbors in addition to coworkers. Put the human element first and keep a healthy perspective of the priorities that your staff members are likely concerned about.

“Getting through the storm together” and “not leaving anyone behind” become critical messages at times of extreme unrest. Exchange your “boss hat” for friend, neighbor, and helper hat and know that people will remember your kindness and feel more loyal to you if you're there to support them when they feel truly vulnerable. Disasters can leave employees anxious, displaced, and unable to work. Compassion and clear communication help restore productivity and a sense of normalcy over time. Be there for them as you would like the ideal boss to be there for you. Keeping this broader perspective in mind, let's develop a template to provide optimal leadership support through any type of crisis that may come your way.

<p>Step 1: Go into immediate "crisis management mode."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Inform senior leadership and authorities of injuries and significant property damage. ● Tend to the wounded/minimize hazards. ● Set up an incident command center where centralized decision-making can occur.
<p>Step 2: Communicate, communicate, and then overcommunicate.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use email, posters, robocalls, texts, and any other communications means at your disposal. ● Provide updates frequently to all stakeholders. ● Create a public question and answer forum. ● Remember, it is far better to say, "We don't know" and "We'll look into it and get back to you," rather than leave a matter unaddressed.
<p>Step 3: Be clear about roles and next steps.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assign those willing to volunteer to help others in specific areas or with specific tasks. ● Disseminate updates regarding on-site work expectations, amended hours of operation, or restricted locations. ● Begin discussions about next steps, including cleanup and restoration.
<p>Step 4: Remember that normalcy and healing begin as a marathon, not as a sprint.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Demonstrate empathy, goodwill, and selflessness. ● Recognize that humans heal at different speeds and in different ways; patience and flexibility are key. ● Check in on your team's well-being and provide resources to help them and their families navigate through significant change.

STEP 1: Go into Immediate "Crisis Management Mode."

In a disaster, activate proper evacuation and safety procedures first. Likewise, remove or reduce hazards and tend to victims. Activate the emergency alarm and notify emergency services and senior management of injuries or severe property damage that poses safety risks. Gather your employees together in a physically safe space to ensure that everyone is accounted for. At that point, create an emergency plan (if your department doesn't have one already). Communicate with your executive leadership team to

formulate a plan for handling the crisis. Coordination across the enterprise is key, especially at the onset of a disaster.

Share your plan. Your next step is to tell the entire team about your crisis management plan. Share what you know in real time. Ask for suggestions and feedback and make this all about “we” since no one—regardless of CEO or other title—will be a master of knowledge or wisdom under emergency circumstances. Provide resources that you may have available as an employer that workers can benefit from at home. (Think personal protective equipment, paper towels, disinfectant, masks, or any other supplies that your company has on hand and can distribute.) Demonstrate compassionate leadership. Be compassionate and empathetic, remembering that this goes well beyond the world of work and potentially affects workers’ families and friends, financial well-being, or the house they live in.

STEP 2: Communicate, Communicate, and Then Overcommunicate. Remember that during a disaster, our fight-or-flight reactions kick in. People act on pure adrenaline. That means that emotions will be on overdrive, while cognition and logic may initially take a backseat. Under such circumstances, people tend to hear things out of context, misunderstand even the simplest instructions, and sometimes overlay their own fears into messages that distort reality. Therefore, it’s critical that messages get repeated multiple times in various ways. Use all the tools you can muster in a short period of time, including company-wide and department-level emails, messages posted on your company intranet and internet sites, communication apps, texts, social media accounts, and even robocalls (automated telephone calls initiated by a computer program to deliver prerecorded messages).

Use every channel available. Using multiple channels simultaneously helps you reach people wherever they are, which can vary in a disaster, depending on the availability of power and cell towers and access to desktops and mobile devices. Check in regularly with your employees and encourage them to do the same. Keep in

mind that power shortages and outages are common during disasters, so make your messages as brief as possible.

But don't forget the human touch: ask employee-volunteers to stand at various locations and communicate updates and instructions in real time (especially if you have a specific location where you'd like all employees to gather). Likewise, post bold written updates on poster boards or paper, especially marking unsafe areas with limited or no access or pointing employees to the gathering area. Assign a "runner" from your team to float back and forth between the incident command center (wherever the key decisions and updates are coming from) and your office or building. And try and gather questions from employees and disseminate responses to the most often asked queries that come your way. Note as well that it's always a good idea to send messages on a regular and predictable schedule (such as every morning at 8:00 a.m. and every evening at 5:00 p.m.).

STEP 3: Be Clear About Roles and Next Steps.

Everyone in "shock mode" clearly experiences trauma to some degree. Some naturally handle it better than others, including first-time managers. Simply rest assured that people will have questions beyond the current crisis in short order, so it's important that you're clear about next steps. Once the initial impact and shock of a devastating event have passed, everyone's attention will begin to turn toward cleanup and restoration efforts. As this phase gets underway, assume that your team members will not know what you or the company expects of them. Your communication, therefore, should spell out everything very clearly and in literal terms, including:

- office hours for the days/weeks ahead (including modified or regular schedules)
- flexibility to work remotely or part-time (if that's an option)
- how to log time off work due to a disaster (for example, "excused time off")

- whether it's okay to bring children into the office if school is out
- how often staff members need to update their supervisor on their availability
- which parts of the building or complex are unsafe or not functional
- dress codes, if relaxed from your usual protocol
- customer and vendor updates, especially if any are temporarily closed
- road conditions and traffic workarounds
- ongoing support from the authorities (such as, fire, police, National Guard)

In short, all employees on your team should know what they are expected to do, where they are expected to report, and when they should be present at work versus remote. Keep this communication flowing through the first days of a crisis to create a sense of security and confidence in your team members. And if you haven't done so already, be sure to create a sheet with employees' personal contact information (including personal cell and home phone) so that everyone on your team knows how to get a hold of everyone else.

STEP 4: Remember That Normalcy and Healing Begin as a Marathon, Not as a Sprint.

Disaster resiliency depends on open communication, goodwill, and empathy above all else. Crises jolt our physical and emotional systems, requiring on-the-spot solutions that include emergency response plans, incident command centers, communications measures, and so much more. And that's the way it will always be. We can't prepare for everything, and certain people may panic and lose their sense of self during an emergency. That's where role-model leadership comes in. Holistic disaster management looks not only at economic, operational, and environmental factors but most importantly at the human side of impact.

No one can experience a magnitude of destruction or disaster and not be changed by it, and it will take time for everyone to work through it. There's no rule book or set timeline for getting back to normal, or even establishing a "new normal." Everyone processes change differently. Check on your team's well-being throughout the weeks following a disaster or disruptive event. Recognize that recovery may take weeks or months, and sometimes even years, depending on the level of loss that people may have suffered. That's why it's important that you provide your team members with resources to help them and their families navigate through this.

Share freely information that you become aware of, point employees in the direction of your employee assistance program provider if they need additional mental, financial, or legal help, and practice the adage "Each to their own without judgment." Healing begins when acceptance of this new normal begins. You can't necessarily control when that's going to happen for each of your team members, but you can create the right and certain conditions for healing to begin through your leadership. Above all, show appreciation and gratitude, recognize team members who go out of their way to help others, entrust employees with new responsibilities, and provide individualized support to the extent you can.

Finally, keep things simple. Make it easy for employees to give back to the community by volunteering and donating goods and services. There's a universal message that says "You cannot give away that which you don't already have," so allowing employees to help others in need creates a sense of healing and peace of mind better than just about anything else. Never underestimate the power of even the simplest acts of kindness. Lead by example, and practice selfless leadership by putting others' needs before your own. Rarely will selfless leadership be more needed than during the time of disaster or its aftermath. You may just find that compassion, empathy, goodwill, and clear communication will foster long-lasting results, such as increased camaraderie among employees and loyalty that transcends your organization.

As Winston Churchill once said, “Never let a good crisis go to waste,” meaning that dramatic change creates the opportunity for people to reinvent themselves and grow exponentially, including professionally, personally, and spiritually. Be that gift to your team members—especially during times of anxiety, confusion, and chaos—and know in your heart that you have the ability to lead through whatever challenges may come your way, making your team stronger and the world a better place.