

Countering Terrorism: The New Cost of Doing Business In America

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Introduction

Since the September 11th World Trade Center attack, the thoughtful human resources professional realizes, instinctively, that his or her workplace has changed, probably forever. However, the HR professional is probably, like most people, unsure both as to exactly how the workplace will change as well as what he or she should do to better manage that change. As a crisis management consultant, a researcher who has studied the effects of mass violence on a metropolitan population, and one who helped design and administrate America's first community mental health program following a terrorist attack, I, too, have wondered about these two issues. Upon reflection I have come to some conclusions that I wish to share.

The Problem

Terrorism and mass violence places victims, bereaved family members, and emergency response personnel at risk for both short-term and long-term physical, emotional, and psychological consequences. However, with mass violence such as the Attack on America, the impact does not stop there. In the year following the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing there were observed in my city's population, significant increases in behavioral indicators associated with stress--such as increased alcohol use, smoking, and psychological distress. Thus, it is not surprising to me that this Fall, reports in the press, for the one-month period following the September 11 attack, noted a 16% increase nationwide in the prescription of antidepressants as compared to the previous year.

I believe, to understand the impact of terrorism on the country as a whole as well as in the workplace, we must use a population exposure model. This model suggests that those people who were not at ground zero, nor had loved ones at ground zero, are also at risk.

That is a major goal of terrorism—to effect a negative psychological change in all of those who are aware of the terrorism. In fact, terrorism is specifically designed to inflict individual and cultural pain so as to effect the political changes desired by the attacker.

Practically speaking, what might be the results of the terrorist attacks and the war against terror on the workplace? Unfortunately, one possible effect may be significant loss of worker productivity. Certainly that is what the terrorists would like to happen. Evidence supporting this possibility include Vice President Cheney’s observation that in the current war it is more than likely there will be a greater number of casualties among American citizens than among American fighting men and women. The same week Mr. Cheney made this statement thirty plus staffers associated with Senator Daschle’s office tested positive for anthrax exposure and the U.S. Capitol building was closed.

Although individual reactions vary, researchers have identified a common pattern of behavioral, biological, psychological, and social responses among individuals exposed directly or vicariously to life-threatening events. Typical reactions include:

BEHAVIORAL	PHYSICAL	COGNITIVE	EMOTIONAL
Sleep problems	Tightness in chest	Confusion	Shock
Hypervigilance	Agitation	Intrusive thoughts	Anxiety
Tearfulness	Fatigue	Memory difficulties	Irritability, anger, rage
Increased family conflicts	Gastrointestinal distress	Decision-making difficulty	Sadness, grief, depression
Social withdrawal	Appetite change	Concentration problems	Despair, self-doubts

Mild to moderate stress reactions in the emergency and early post-impact phases of mass violence are highly prevalent because survivors (and their families, rescue workers, and community members) accurately recognize the grave danger involved in the disaster. Although stress reactions may seem “extreme,” and cause distress, they generally do not

become chronic problems. In a typical, one-occurrence disaster, such as a tornado or earthquake, most people recover fully from moderate stress reactions within 6 to 16 months. However, in the present situation with continued terrorist attacks expected to take place for the foreseeable future we must also expect to live with such stress reactions indefinitely.

Furthermore, some people suffer much more serious emotional difficulties both in the short term as well as in the long term following mass violence. In fact, research suggests that there are certain individual characteristics that can either increase ones risk of developing long-term difficulties such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or enhance ones resiliency. Research following the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City provides one case example. It was found that nearly half of the blast survivors studied had one or more active post-disaster psychiatric disorders and one-third met criteria for PTSD at six months after the bombing. This and other studies suggest that the following individual characteristics should be considered risk factors for people developing long term problems following incidents of mass violence:

- Prior or pre-existing mental health or substance abuse problems
- Prior traumatization or unresolved losses
- Low socioeconomic status, low education level
- Family instability, conflict, single-parent household
- Perceived or real lack of social support, isolation
- Exposure or perceived exposure to a dangerous or noxious substances

Individual resiliency factors are a reverse of the above and include:

- Relative mental health, absence of history of diagnosable psychiatric problems

- Capacity to tolerate emotions and cope flexibly with symptoms associated with trauma and bereavement
- Higher socioeconomic status, higher educational level
- Immediate and extended family provides practical, emotional and financial support
- Effective use of social support systems

Recommendations for Problem-Solving

On October 9th of this year I was asked to speak at a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' National Summit in Washington, D.C. One topic I was asked to address was what employers, businesses, and human resource managers can do to counteract the effects of terrorism in the workplace. My recommendations stem from several of the resiliency factors noted above coupled with the realization that proactive steps must be made.

First, employers and human resource managers must realize that it is no longer business as usual, that it will never be business as usual, and, in fact, there is now a new cost to doing business in America. To deny this fact and do nothing can only lead to lower productivity and decreased profitability.

Therefore, business owners and human resource managers can no longer avoid developing and implementing a comprehensive corporate crisis management and response plan. Such a plan must include everything from how to handle workplace violence to how to deal with bomb threats or anthrax scares. Further, these plans must include a mental health component with the goal of maintaining workplace productivity. Traditional employee assistance programs (EAP's or CAP's) cannot be relied upon to provide the type of direction and proactive training required to prepare, maintain, and, to the extent possible, safeguard workers and businesses for the war in which our country is involved. Traditional

employee assistance programs have neither the expertise nor the desire to take the financial responsibility for such preparedness. This is what I mean when I noted earlier that there is now a new cost to doing business in America.

How can the development and administration of a crisis management and response plan help maintain worker productivity and counteract the stress reactions discussed above? There are three answers to this question. First, by preparing such a plan you are demonstrating to your fellow workers a practical confidence that events, even traumatic events, can be managed. Next, if and when a critical incident occurs you and your fellow workers will be better able to manage the crisis and live through it. Third, and probably most importantly, the crisis management and response plan includes regular and targeted employee training and education. This is what I term the mental health component. One thing we learned in Oklahoma City after the bombing is that knowledge quells fear. Possible training topics include what the company is doing regarding handling mail, what to do when there is a bomb threat, what are the signs and symptoms of various chemical and biological agents, and how to handle emotional stress in these dangerous times. Communication is key.

What are the practical steps to designing and implementing a corporate crisis management and response plan? First, senior management must make the decision to do so. Without the foresight, guidance, and commitment of motivated leadership nothing of importance can be accomplished.

Second, a crisis management team needs to be selected and prepared. To perform this task a staff skills inventory should be completed, there should be designated staff assignments during crisis incidents, and there should be an assessment of those employees who need special assistance in evacuations or other crises.

Next, the crisis management team needs to perform a hazards assessment. This not only includes an inspection and analysis of the physical plant or facility but also the administration of a worker survey or questionnaire regarding safety concerns of employees. Presently, it is my recommendation that the worker survey be administered twice yearly. It is important that human resource management understand the concerns of their fellow employees so that appropriate training and education can be obtained and provided.

Fourth, the crisis management team needs to obtain relevant material and supplies. One aspect of meeting this criterion is the development of a crisis management “toolbox”. This “toolbox” should be secured in the designated command post location for use by the crisis management team during a critical incident. The toolbox should include the following:

- Responsibilities check list to identify who does what.
- Administration and staff roster with emergency phone numbers, and identifying those with special training and skills
- Keys and entry codes to all door and locks
- Phone lists
- Crisis Response equipment — two-way radios, cellular phones, etc.
- Blue prints of the buildings
- Maps of evacuation routes in case of fire, bomb, weather-related damage, etc., and the relocation sites for each section of the facilities.

Fifth, the crisis management team needs to adopt action-steps and forms for reporting and monitoring crisis incidents. Likewise, the crisis management team must develop risk assessment and response level options. More specifically, when an incident occurs there will be a response required at the unit level, building level (exterior or interior),

or from outside resources. The nature and severity of the incident will determine the appropriate level of response.

The site crisis management team should assess the circumstances and determine an appropriate risk category. The risk categories should be:

- No risk
- Low risk
- Medium risk
- High risk
- Imminent danger.

Once the risk level is assigned a decision is made regarding the most appropriate means to handle or address the situation.

Sixth, when a crisis incident occurs the crisis management team should be ready to follow and complete specific Action Guides. Action Guides are step-by-step checklists of actions and decisions that have been specially designed and practiced for certain types of critical incidents—such as verbal threat of violence; bomb threat; anthrax exposure; armed intruder; radioactive materials exposure; hostage situation; electrical service, telephone service, and/or utilities disruption, etc. I recommend that these Action Guides are not only kept in a central location but also provided in specially designed databases compatible with the various handheld or pocket personal computer devices so that crisis management team members have ready access to them.

Seventh, the crisis management team should develop appropriate site evacuation plans. Eighth, training and education programs should be developed and maintained. These programs should be designed both to train the crisis management team in how to respond to various crisis incidents but also to educate and prepare the workforce.

Ninth, the crisis management team or a designee should be prepared to deal with the media and a checklist for communicating with the media be adopted and practiced. Finally, thought and training should be put into post crisis follow-up, analysis, and humanitarian response.

Conclusion

The word terror derives from the Latin word *terrere*, meaning, “to frighten”. One of the greatest fears a human can have is loss of control—of not knowing what is going to happen, when it’s going to happen, or what one should do, when it does happen. The foundation of counter-terrorism lies in developing and applying procedures that reduce fear. Now is the time to implement a corporate crisis management and response plan. Implementing such a plan will help maintain worker productivity by reducing fear. It will reduce fear because the worker will be trained and educated as to what different critical incidents might happen and what to do, if and when, a critical incident does happen. Regular communication between management and employees on these issues is key. In this way the human resource professional will help his or her fellow employees gain and maintain control over their work environment.