

The Impact of the September 11 Attacks on New York Companies:

The Challenge to Leadership

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Based on our experience working with companies in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, we believe that something fundamental has changed as a result of Sept 11th. People are undertaking a broad reexamination of the values by which they live and work. As a result of the trauma many employees experienced, many have found it very difficult to return to work. Fears of commuting into the city or remaining in tall buildings, and strong feelings of needing to maintain bonds with family have disrupted many employees' willingness to work long hours as a sign of commitment to business goals. Travel has also become an issue, not only because of fears for safety, but because of reluctance to leave home and family. Many are saying that they will take a hard look at their work-life balance, but fear that they will be alienated from peers or suffer poor performance evaluations if their organization continues to celebrate 24/7 as a badge of merit. At the same time, these same economic conditions mean that unemployment is increasing and many people will be happy to keep their jobs. Under this imperative their determination to rebalance their lives may quickly crumble. Or will it?

We believe that a strong corporate culture that values the individual and that stands for something that inspires them will build the loyalty and commitment to burn the midnight oil should that be necessary. We have all read about the IT workers who worked around the clock immediately after the World Trade Center disaster to get their firms up and running at alternate sites. They demonstrated the empowerment and self motivation that managers must continue to encourage and make part of the ongoing culture of their firms. But let us make no mistake about it: this and countless other demonstrations of devotion and even bravery after the disaster were not post-September 11th version of the old "let's pull together to meet that deadline" push. Rather, this is the kind of energy and commitment born of a dire threat to safety and security. As we have seen in the past in dealing with countless crises involving danger and loss affecting workers in a multitude of industries, and have seen magnified a thousandfold in this current situation, it is the need for interpersonal connection and social support that has motivated and continues to motivate the recovery of businesses in the wake of this horror.

All of this is already known from our study of traumatic stress reactions in victims of war and violence. Even when the initial reactions of fear, anxiety, sleeplessness and frayed nerves have subsided, the long-term effects of psychological trauma do their destructive work: isolation, loss of trust, depression, addictions, marital dysfunction, physical illness. The range of people in the New York City area that are at risk for these disorders is wide and still to be determined. From our experience, however, we can say that people from a number of groups are at risk for traumatic stress reactions. Many of these people, although physically safe, at home with their families, and reporting to work daily, have already developed or will develop disorders related to the trauma of Sept 11th.

- People working in the vicinity of the WTC at the time of the attack. Most were terrified and were in fear of their lives, many directly witnessed dead and dying people, and most spent many hours in a state of panic and disorientation (which we know increases the risk of long-term stress disorders).
- People who escaped from the towers.
- People living in the vicinity of the towers in Manhattan, surrounding boroughs, and New Jersey, who witnessed the attack from their homes or on their way to work.
- Emergency personnel (Police, Fire, Medical, clergy and others) who witnessed the horror and lost coworkers.
- Recovery workers (this is continuing).
- Communities in NY and surrounds who have suffered multiple losses. This can be expected to impact on children, families, school and community leaders.

The following outcomes can result from acute or prolonged exposure to trauma. These will interfere with work and personal life, may lead to health problems and may be life threatening:

- Anxiety, depression, and other serious mood disorders
- Problems in concentration and thinking
- Flashbacks, intrusive thoughts and images
- Fears, phobias, restrictions in range of activities (e.g., travel)
- Substance abuse
- Marital and relationship dysfunction

We are seeing these phenomena in workplaces throughout the New York City area. How much more can we expect these reactions to be found in the directly and traumatically affected companies that were housed at the World Trade Center?

What is the effect of these phenomena on these workplaces? The best way to find out is to look at what middle and line managers are facing confronted with a traumatized workforce. What we find is that they are uncertain and torn. They are feeling their own substantial internal pressures as well as pressures from upper management to recover from the overwhelming blow to their company infrastructure, threat to customer base, and the loss of critical personnel. At the same time, they are feeling compassion and concern for the traumatized employees for whom they are responsible. This creates confusion, conflict, and difficult questions: Do I adjust my performance expectations? When do I require my sales force to begin their 5 day/twice monthly travel schedule again? How hard to I push? Finally, managers, much as they are trained to deny this, are not immune to the effects of trauma. These talented women and men, who so pride themselves on their drive, energy, sharpness, and skills, may find themselves suddenly confronted with their own compromised ability to judge and to function.

The effects on overall business productivity may be subtle and indirect. People, especially in the aftermath of a trauma when there is enormous energy and activity directed toward recovery, may be temporarily (and necessarily) numbed to some of their reactions of grief and fear. In the months to follow, with the return of some normal

routines, employees at many levels of the company may begin to feel, with a sense of relief, that it is over and it will be smooth sailing. No one will notice the symptoms of depression in themselves and their colleagues until people are out on sick leave, or marriages founder, or creativity and love of work suddenly appear to have fled. Collegial and work relationships that previously were smooth and productive may suffer when one or both members becomes withdrawn, irritable, chronically fatigued or seemingly less committed to common goals. Whereas some teams may rise to new heights of cooperation and productivity, other teams begin to falter when the burden of unresolved grief, the sheer burden of recovering from massive loss, or the uncertainty of job security simply overwhelms the team's capacity to communicate and to cope.

The challenge to leadership: what will it take?

The challenge to our workplaces is huge, but not insurmountable. We believe that if corporate leadership can take on this challenge, this crisis may provide an unprecedented opportunity to not only repair the damage but to create workplaces more committed to employee health and individual and group productivity than before. The solution consists of four components: (1) Leadership responsibility, (2) Attention to management ranks, (3) Innovation in work design and employment practices, and (4) Mental health safety nets.

Leadership responsibility

In a climate of crisis, the prime enemy is denial. It is the responsibility of top leadership to, first and foremost, acknowledge the enormity of the trauma and the necessity of ongoing attention to the effects of this trauma on the employees of the company, and to take actions in line with this acknowledgement. Denial can take many forms: it can look like a benevolent but short-lived generosity or relaxation of productivity expectations, which is soon replaced by a return to a gung-ho push for 150%. It is not the push or desire for normalcy and business success that is the problem – employees at every level share this desire wholeheartedly with the CEO. It is, rather, leadership's blindness and insensitivity, real or perceived, to the pain of people at every level of the organization that will doom the leader's efforts to failure. To be an effective leader in conditions such as those we are currently witnessing, the message must be: "We have been hurt, and we are still hurting. We will pull through, but we must work together. I need to hear from you, I need to know what you are experiencing, and what you need in order to be able to give your commitment and your energy to this company. There is nothing more important than to continue to pay attention to our needs and experience as human beings through this challenging time. This is the only path to recovery, and it is to this path that I and your senior management team are committed."

Attention to management ranks

In times of crisis and organizational challenge, managers at middle and line levels are at the most risk for debilitating stress and burnout. They are, indeed, as described above, the "salami in the sandwich," caught between the demands of their higher ups (as well as their own internal sense of responsibility for achieving business objectives) and their sense of responsibility to and connection with the employees who report to them. They are the group most likely to feel frustrated by the unavailability or lack of useful direction

from top leadership. They are as well the group most likely to be in touch with the realities “on the ground” with respect to the ability of the organization to fulfill the expectations coming from the top. In the absence of established, well-designed forums for communication and data-gathering initiated by top leadership, no news, good or bad, will reach the top levels. Furthermore, in the absence of this kind of communication, it is *predictable and unavoidable* that middle and line management will feel increasingly beleaguered, isolated and demoralized. There is nothing more important, therefore, both from a business standpoint and from the standpoint of organizational morale and health, for top leadership to do than to establish consistent, regular, and two-way communication with middle and line management ranks. This practice must be literally institutionalized and made part of the culture for the short and long term in the aftermath of the trauma. This is also where outside consultants can be useful. No consultant – and certainly no “counselor” – can take the place of authentic company leadership during the process of recovery. However, the presence of an outside expert can facilitate open communication and the often necessary reframing of the relationship and mode of exchange that is often necessary during times of crisis.

Innovation in work design and employment practices

Several themes have emerged in our work with companies recovering from the losses and traumas stemming from the September 11th attacks with respect to the need for changes in the way some work is carried out. These have to do mainly with shifts in employees’ work life balance priorities described above and needs in relation to safety and security. In brief, these involve a need for the company to (1) Re-evaluate arrangements for flex time. (2) Modify as needed explicit or implicit expectations for greater than a 40 hour work week, especially for “exempt” or non-hourly workers. (3) Explore alternatives to travel for business activities such as sales, merchandise buying, training and business meetings. These alternatives typically included utilizing technology for teleconferencing and telecommuting. In virtually every company we have worked with on this issue, the technology was available and installed, but *underutilized*. (4) Revisit existing security and safety procedures. It is important to add that these innovations, adjustments or policy changes are not being offered as a unilateral, benevolent gesture by top management, but emerged directly as the result of deliberate, proactive, two-way communication between top leadership and all levels of the company. And that is precisely the point: at times of crisis, loss, uncertainty and threat, people require the sense that they have a voice and that there is a listening, responsive leadership. This, more than anything else leadership can do, creates a sense of confidence, loyalty, and trust. It continues to come down to *communication*: authentic, consistent, reliable, and flexible.

Create mental health safety nets

The presence of a high-quality Employee Assistance Program is essential for a workforce in the process of recovering from a trauma of these proportions. It is incumbent on leadership to ensure that the EAP serve truly as an accessible benefit and an instrument of preventive mental health. Many EAPs on the market today are little else than a gateway to managed care mental health services, offered as a free or inexpensive addition to healthcare benefits. Consult an expert to make sure that your EAP provides what you

deserve and need: a tool for your employees and their families to provide free, confidential short-term counseling, or, if needed, referral into the appropriate healthcare or community-based resources.

Whether it be through the EAP or a specialized trauma or crisis consultant, leadership should find resources to ensure that employees suffering from trauma-related conditions reach the right kind of care: not any mental health service will do to help employees recover from trauma-related conditions or to help prevent normal trauma-related stress from developing into more serious mental health or medical conditions.

Conclusion: the challenge and the opportunity

Once more the American workplace has become the focus of violence, terror, and loss of life. This, of course, is an event of such scope and impact that previous events, as shocking and terrible as they were, pale in comparison. But the lessons are the same, although the stakes are incalculably higher. The lessons of past incidents is that in the wake of a threat to safety and stability, leadership is crucial. It is not the therapists, the security experts or police guards that ultimately make the difference: it is the CEO, the director, the leader.

Today, workplaces, not only in New York and Washington, D.C. but across the nation are facing a challenge to their very existence. In a sense, and the point has been made, our very system of commerce and business has been attacked. But – and we have had this lesson over and over again in our history as a nation – this lesson is not about business, it is not about capitalism. It is about our values, our very soul as a nation and a society. Capitalism is a system, not a set of values. The survival and prospering of a company is not about capital, or even about market forces. It is about people. Once again, and perhaps more than ever since the industrial revolution, we are called upon to learn that our workplaces are places in which we live. They can be places of creativity, of community, and of health, or they can be places of sickness, stress and isolation. The workplace can be a place of solace and healing -- a place, in the wake of tragedy and trauma, to search for meaning, connection and trust in the very midst of the gaping wounds left by violence.

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