

The McGraw-Hill Homeland Security Handbook

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CHAPTER 51

The Challenge to Corporate Leadership: Managing the Human Impact of Terrorism on Business Recovery

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Terrorism . . . is intended to coerce societies or governments by inducing fear in their populations. . . . The nation's mental health, public health, medical and emergency response systems currently are not able to meet the psychological needs that result from terrorism.¹

INTRODUCTION: ONE COMPANY'S STORY

FashionLine,² in the garment district in midtown Manhattan, New York City, is a wholly owned division of EuroLine, a global company based in Europe. FashionLine sells discounted women's apparel through catalogs. It houses 80 percent of its administration, design, purchasing, and catalog production in six floors of an office building on Seventh Avenue, where it employs 325 people. Its information technology (IT) group, billing department, and call center—employing 175 people—are across the river in New Jersey. On the Monday after 9/11, FashionLine is feeling the effects at several organizational levels.

1. *Overall workforce:* 90 percent of the employees have returned to work. However, others are unwilling to return because they are afraid to use the tunnels and bridges that lead into Manhattan, or because they are reluctant to be separated from their families; they are working from home or using vacation

or sick time. Many who have returned to work say that they cannot concentrate. They check the Internet for news compulsively, feel compelled to call their families several times a day, worry about their children at school, have fears about further attacks, find their minds wandering, and keep remembering vivid details of 9/11.

2. *Management*: Line and middle managers are also experiencing shock and fear; but in addition they must deal with production deadlines, since—as the upper managers keep reminding them—this is the busiest season of the fashion year. Moreover, they are concerned, both professionally and personally, about the people who report to them. They wonder who, if anyone, can provide guidance in this unprecedented situation.
3. *Executives*: The executive managers feel, above all, unrelenting pressure from the parent company, which acquired FashionLine only recently. Calls from EuroLine express concern about 9/11, but the clear subtext is concern about deadlines and profits. Thus FashionLine's executives in turn exert pressure downward. The middle managers respond dutifully and encouragingly but have private doubts—not only about absent and shocked employees but about employees whose work depends on travel and who are still waiting for commercial flights to resume.
4. *Human resources (HR)*: The HR managers meet with the chief operating officer (COO) and pull out the "Business Continuity Plan," but it offers little to guide them, since the physical plant is undamaged, employees are physically unharmed, and access to the workplace is not impeded. Nothing in the plan seems applicable except a postincident review of evacuation procedures. FashionLine conducts a fire drill and finds that stairwells are unlit and that some floors are inaccessible because release mechanisms in the doors malfunction. The employees then demand a meeting with management and insist on immediate repairs. A fire safety expert who has been called in remarks that in some situations it is safer to remain in a building rather than evacuate; this principle proved fatal on 9/11, and many of FashionLine's employees now say they

would ignore such instructions. The next day, a few more employees fail to report to work.

TERRORISM AS A BUSINESS ISSUE

The situation at FashionLine was typical in the New York metropolitan area after 9/11; and it was even worse in the financial district, where the attack had taken place and thousands of employees had fled for their lives. At one firm, a study concluded that 43 percent of the staff were at risk of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and nine months later the rate of PTSD remained at 21 percent.³ In Washington, D.C., government employees reacted similarly, and their supervisors and office heads—who had no plans or formal procedures to follow—responded with silence or confusion. The following excerpt suggests how terrorism can affect business functioning:

There are other indirect costs to non-target companies, such as the fear and anxiety the threat of terrorism produces that sap employee productivity. "Terrorists wreak havoc even when they don't attack, just by implying they might," says Lisa Parker, senior vice president of The Strickland Group, a New York-based executive coaching and development firm. "There is a substantial risk of a loss of productivity from employee fear, including greater absenteeism, missed deadlines, irritability and difficulty concentrating and making decisions. The recent scare in New York [an intelligence report on terrorists' plans to target specific buildings in New York and New Jersey] dramatized this starkly. I have a colleague who had trouble sleeping and would come in to work late and go to meetings tired and frazzled. And we were not even close to the action. Fear has a way of infecting everyone."⁴

The effects of 9/11 went far beyond New York and Washington. Employers in high-rise buildings across the United States reported that people were afraid to come to work, and businesses that relied on travel had to find other ways to contact colleagues, customers, and suppliers.

Much the same had been true in 1995, when the federal office building in Oklahoma City was bombed: almost half the survivors developed anxiety, depression, and problems with

alcohol; and over one-third reported PTSD.⁵ A year after the bombing, Oklahomans reported increased rates of alcohol use, smoking, stress, and PTSD symptoms as compared with another city.⁶

The Challenge to Business

Because it has struck workplaces, terrorism is a critical business and management issue; and counterterrorism is especially important for industries that are likely to be targets or to be affected by damage to domestic or global communication, transportation, and security. Accordingly, companies are reviewing their plans for emergency response and business continuity. Also, an increasing number of businesses now understand the need for procedures to deal with the psychological impact of traumatic events in the workplace⁷—a need that is particularly urgent because terrorism intentionally exacts its heaviest toll through psychological effects, and because those effects can pervade entire communities.

Effects on Productivity and Health: One Company's Response

Long after 9/11, managers still needed to plan for accommodating employees' needs. The present author worked closely with one company that responded skillfully and compassionately: the TJX Corporation, based in New England, seven of whose employees were passengers on the planes that crashed into the World Trade Center. At the headquarters where these employees had worked, centers for information, counseling, and support remained in place for weeks. Also, although TJX's business relies on long-distance travel, the CEO and his representatives announced, in person, that no employee would board an airplane until he or she was individually ready to do so. Half-day meetings were scheduled for managers and traveling employees to provide information on alternative travel arrangements, on how to manage traumatic stress and grieving, on coping with family concerns such as children's fears about parents' safety, on counseling and consulting resources, and on how to adjust performance expectations. Updated information on travel security was continually transmitted on TJX's intranet, by telephone, and face to face within work units.

The Need for Special Planning

Unlike TJX—but like FashionLine—many companies, however well-meaning, had no appropriate plans in place and therefore stumbled. They found that standard business continuity and emergency response plans cannot be relied on in a terrorist event. These plans deal with recovery after the destruction of physical infrastructure and information assets, but not with emotional reactions even when the physical plant is untouched, and not with damage to the societal infrastructure that impedes communication and travel even when people appear healthy. However, there are some well-established, broadly applicable approaches to managing traumatic stress and organizational upheaval.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA AND THE WORKPLACE

There has been substantial research on the psychological response to traumatic events, including military combat, physical and sexual assault and abuse, mass disasters, and occupational demands (as in law enforcement).⁸ And since the establishment in 1971 of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and the continued development in the private sector of health and stress management in the workplace, there has also been much research on the relationship between workplace conditions and stress-related health issues.⁹ Private companies commonly take steps to minimize or prevent the negative effects of traumatic events on employees and on overall organizational functioning.

Most companies have disaster plans and emergency response plans, often covering evacuation, public relations, legal protections, and death benefits. Increasingly, companies are also developing plans to deal with the acute and long-term effects of traumatic events on employees' health and morale, but these plans may not be comprehensive or well integrated into crisis management and emergency response. Specific procedures for treating injured or traumatized employees are rare, even though such employees may never return to work or to full productivity—and even though researchers in psychology, occupational medicine, sociology, and law have noted a dramatic increase in disability claims relating to mental injury and consider emotional stress a very important issue,¹⁰

especially when it is caused by terrorism. Usually, terrorism cannot permanently halt commerce or industrial production; but by impairing workers' health and productivity, it can have enduring effects on communications, production, transportation, and commerce.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

PTSD, which was recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980,¹¹ results when functioning continues to be disrupted as a consequence of a traumatic experience. It is characterized by intrusive reexperiencing of the traumatic event; emotional numbness or, conversely, difficulty controlling emotions (especially anger); withdrawal from intimacy and social interaction; impaired concentration and memory; and avoidance of activities or situations that are reminders of the trauma. Its long-term consequences include severe depression, substance abuse, marital problems, and withdrawal from work and social activities.¹²

According to researchers and practitioners, a positive outcome requires a supportive environment in which survivors' feelings are accepted and can be openly discussed; otherwise, survivors may be unaware that their reactions are normal, may feel overwhelmed, and may make no further effort to process the experience. Lindemann described a tendency to "wall off" the trauma from consciousness when conscious processing fails.¹³

The Role of Group Support and Leadership

People react variously to trauma in the workplace, but many of the symptoms of PTSD can impair an organization's ability to continue business as usual, even when there is no damage to IT systems, the physical plant, communications, or the supply chain. Furthermore, morale can be undermined when leadership is perceived as uncaring, unprepared, or in denial.

After a collective trauma in a workplace, group support must be mobilized. Normally, employees are connected—and an organization is enabled to function—by informal communication and support networks within and between work groups. But group support in the aftermath of a crisis does not emerge spontaneously; therefore, leadership must plan and implement such support by explicitly

permitting and fostering interpersonal communication about a traumatic event. Otherwise, employees may assume that they are not permitted to openly work through their reactions with others at work and will not do so. Similarly, information may be lacking, so that rumors and fear spread, especially when terrorism is involved. In such a situation employees' need for information, connection with leadership, and interpersonal connection must be given the highest priority. This will reduce the risk of PTSD and of general breakdown in organizational functioning.¹⁴

Crisis Management as a Core Business Activity

In this discussion, a *crisis* is any event or series of events that threatens an organization's survival or its finances, brand, reputation, or relationships with employees, customers, or suppliers. *Crisis management* is not simply the handling of a potentially catastrophic but transitory situation such as a product recall, an industrial accident, a natural disaster, or mass violence. Rather, it has become, increasingly, a central activity closely linked to strategic planning. How a company plans for crises is

an expression of the organization's fundamental purpose or strategic vision. . . . The sociotechnical systems that we call "corporations" are so complex and interdependent that they have become extremely fragile. . . . A minor event, even a single individual, can now have a drastic effect on an organization as a whole and on its community and environment. These events will not diminish in this century; they are, in fact, increasing rapidly.¹⁵

Thus crisis management—which we will call "Human Impact Planning"—must be comprehensive and integrated with security, emergency management, business continuity, and plans to manage the impact on employees, families, and stakeholders. Below, we describe planning for human impact in particular; but it is not to be seen as a separate activity—it is part of the whole.

PLANNING FOR THE HUMAN IMPACT OF TERRORISM

Human Impact Planning is concerned with managing the effects of crises on employees, interns and students, families, the community,

customers, contractors, and others. It is a key component of an overall plan for response to and recovery from any crisis. It addresses three primary concerns:

1. *Prevention of traumatic stress.* Some employees will be at risk for PTSD; this reaction can impair general morale and the ability of the group to return to normal functioning and productivity within a reasonable time. In the mid and long term, unrecognized, untreated PTSD can permanently remove employees from the workplace through attrition, termination, and disability.
2. *Facilitating crisis-related communications.* Traumatic events in the workplace disrupt formal and informal communication, so that individual victims are "sealed over." When employees cannot talk about what has happened, and when their questions and fears are not addressed, their individual and collective productivity will suffer.
3. *Support for management.* Traumatic crises are enormously stressful for managers, whose normal functioning as leaders may be impeded. They may feel that they have lost control over operations and over employees' well-being and may be unsure about how to respond effectively when they themselves are shocked, confused, and grieving. However, employees will still look to them for direction, safety, and normality.

In general, Human Impact Planning spans the life cycle of crisis management from planning through response to recovery; and its guiding principle, throughout the process, is that attention to effects on employees and other stakeholders is crucial. Human Impact Planning will typically include the following elements. These will be discussed in more detail below:

- ♦ Identification of the team responsible for planning
- ♦ Identification of situations that may impair the health and functioning of employees and business organizations
- ♦ Review of the systems in place to prevent and respond to these impacts
- ♦ Provision of support and tools for management response

- ♦ Provision of services during and after a crisis to respond to individuals' acute psychological and physical needs
- ♦ Monitoring of the medium- and long-term effects of a crisis on organizational health and productivity

Identifying the Planning Team

A multidisciplinary team should be involved in developing a plan to protect the company from the immediate and ongoing effects of terrorism. This may be an existing team, such as crisis management or business continuity, and it should include or have an explicit mandate from executive management. In general, the team will include representatives from the following groups: human resources; risk management; legal; health, safety, and security; and operational management.

Identifying Potential Impacts

The team has two initial tasks: (1) review the range of crises and situations that may directly or indirectly threaten the health, work, and psychological well-being of employees, family members, the community, and other people; (2) understand how an impact on employees and their families might, in turn, affect the organization.

An attack may have an immediate or direct impact on operations, or an indirect effect. For example, bioterrorism may make a hospital a "hot zone," necessitating a plan for operations at an emergency site. But it may also have a direct effect on operations by causing lockdowns or disruptions in transportation and thus limiting the ability of the staff to get to work—at a time when these employees are most urgently needed for emergency services, including decontamination. What must be done to ensure that employees will be comfortable about coming to a potential hot zone? In short, it is as important to prepare for staff shortages or reduced functioning as it is to prepare for disruptions of equipment, the supply chain, or IT. For example, with regard to IT and telecommunications, it is necessary to have backup systems and emergency procedures. But all this will be useless without a trained, skilled staff, so backups and redundancies must also be established

for human resources. What if human resources are reduced because of casualties or because critical staff members cannot get to work? What if there is only one shift available, and the people on this shift are working around the clock? What can be done to prevent mistakes that result from fatigue or burnout?

Reviewing and Assessing Systems

Specifically, it will be important to review plans for crisis management, business continuity, and emergency response to ensure that they can handle something as serious as a terrorist attack. "Tabletop exercises" and full-scale drills are good ways to review systems.

Here is a sampling of questions to be included in the review:

- Since normal communications may be compromised, disrupted, or nonexistent during an attack, do alternative procedures exist to account for people?
- Is there a coordinated plan with specific objectives, procedures, and resources to ensure the physical and emotional recovery of employees?
- Is there a representative of human resources on the crisis management team?
- Do policies and procedures specifically address issues that arise when employees die on the job?
- Are managers trained to recognize and deal with traumatic stress in employees?
- Does the existing business continuity plan rotate the staff during various scenarios?
- Do scenarios for business disruption take into account that members of the recovery team may also experience stress?
- Is there a communications plan for employees and families during and after a crisis, to minimize lost work time and ensure recovery of productivity?
- Are special resources in place to provide psychological first aid in scenarios involving terrorism, catastrophic accidents, and natural disasters?
- Have arrangements been made for special benefits and relief for employees and families who have been dislocated or have suffered injury or death of loved ones?

- Have psychological first-aid and counseling resources been evaluated? Special skills are needed to handle severe psychological impacts; also, such resources must have the capacity to handle unusually high demand.

Once the required resources and procedures are in place and integrated into or coordinated fully with existing response systems, the team will assume its role as part of ongoing response and recovery activities.

Providing Support and Tools for Managers

Managers are the key to recovery, but they are at a high risk for debilitating stress when the workforce has been traumatized. Because of their position and role, they may feel uncertain and torn. They are under internal pressures, as well as pressures from higher management, to help the company deal with damage to its infrastructure, customer base, and operations, and in many cases with temporary or long-term loss of personnel. They are also concerned about the employees for whom they are responsible. They may ask: Should I adjust my performance expectations? When should I require my sales force to resume the five-day twice-monthly travel schedule? How can I expect a 24/7 rush to meet a deadline? How hard should I push? Also, the managers themselves may be traumatized and may find that their judgment and functioning are compromised.

Middle and line managers are the group most likely to feel frustrated if top leadership is unavailable or fails to provide useful direction. They are also the group most likely to be in touch with reality "on the ground" regarding the organization's ability to meet demands imposed 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; and middle and line managers will inevitably feel beleaguered, isolated, and demoralized. From a business standpoint and from the standpoint of organizational morale and health, there is nothing more important for top leadership than establishing consistent, regular, two-way communication with middle and line managers. This practice must be literally institutionalized and made part of the culture for the short and long term in the aftermath of trauma.

A plan for management support will include:

- Clearly defined and mandated meetings for management groups under certain conditions such as an attack or threat
- Skilled consultants be available to these groups
- A protocol for the meetings that includes opportunities for participants to talk about their own stress and about management issues (e.g., employees' stress, performance expectations, helpful resources), and clarification of the needs of upper management (discussed below)
- Consulting resources available to management for guidance in the handling of individual or work-group situations immediately after a crisis and during recovery

The importance of group support for managers cannot be overestimated. Individual supervisors and managers must know that they are not alone, and that specialized knowledge and adjustments in expectations and work rules will emerge from group interaction and the input of experts. Leadership must communicate to management that the best path back to normal productivity is through short-term adjustments. To deny or ignore trauma by "pushing through" sends the wrong message and flies in the face of everything we know about recovery.

Providing Services for Acute Psychological and Physical Needs

Standard occupational health and safety systems may be inadequate or inappropriate in crises such as terrorist attacks. The capacity of resources such as employee assistance programs must be assessed before the need for these programs arises. It is a common mistake to assume that contracted counseling services can handle a company's complex, wide-ranging needs after a disaster. Furthermore, methods commonly in use to prevent or mitigate traumatic stress in survivors of or witnesses to mass disasters have recently been scrutinized to assess their efficacy and their potential to do harm.¹⁶ Careful consideration of methods and practitioners of postincident counseling must be a part of any plan to respond to human needs. Finally, counseling and specialized crisis counseling services are only one part of a program to respond to such needs. For example, services

should extend to families so that employees can work reasonably free of concerns for their families' well being. If there is widespread damage to infrastructure, public health services, and other public services, the physical needs of employees and their families may become a crucial business issue.

A full list of these services should be developed as part of a comprehensive response and recovery plan that is in place beforehand (and has been approved at the highest levels). The plan will often extend beyond standard compensation and benefits and thus will have to be coordinated with human resources and executive management. Specific services and assistance will depend on the company, its location, and the nature and severity of the impact. However, most plans will include the following components:

- *Robust systems for tracking employees after an attack:* This is necessary for operational reasons and is part of caring for coworkers and families. A disaster is worsened when a company cannot quickly generate information about casualties and deliver it to families and coworkers.
- *Family preparedness planning:* This may include information, emergency and safety equipment, and provisions for communicating between the workplace and home (e.g., satellite phones not dependent on power or on infrastructure such as cellular towers).
- *Financial and physical assistance:* This may include emergency funds and loans, electric generators, emergency food and water supplies, temporary housing, and assistance with travel in the case of full-scale evacuations or temporary relocations of families.
- *Coordination with public and private relief:* Relief agencies include the Red Cross, state and federal victim assistance programs, and public health entities.

Monitoring Medium- and Long-Term Effects of a Crisis

Psychological and other health effects, as well as lowered morale and impaired trust, may have an incubation period; some people may not recover fully for a long time, if at all. Thus executive

management must assess—as a business issue—the continuing effect of the crisis on the health and functioning of individuals and work units. Productivity will not be reestablished if some employees are suffering from unrecognized stress reactions. Even if there is no immediate apparent effect such as absenteeism or medical claims, there may be “presenteeism” and poor morale, so that within the first year to 18 months, turnover will increase. This can be avoided if the steps outlined above are followed, such as providing managers with the tools to recognize and understand the effects of stress and ensuring flexibility in performance expectations. Protocols for monitoring recovery throughout the organization should be part of the comprehensive human impact plan.

CONCLUSION

Terrorism presents a considerable but not insurmountable challenge. In meeting this challenge, corporate leadership has an opportunity to create workplaces more fully committed to employees' health and to individual and group productivity. The solution described here has five fundamental components: (1) commitment by leadership to comprehensive planning; (2) thorough review of existing crisis management, business continuity, and emergency planning; (3) provision of direct support to management; (4) flexibility in work design and employment practices; and (5) monitoring medium- and long-term effects.

As 9/11 demonstrated, the American workplace can be a focus of violence, terror, and death. As those of us in crisis consulting began working with the leaders and managers of affected companies, we realized that it is not the crisis counselors, management consultants, security experts, or guards at the door who determine whether the employees of a company can recover a sense of safety and well-being—or whether the company itself will survive. It is, rather, the actions and vision of senior leadership that pull a company through, to continue its mission stronger and more vital than before.

NOTES

1. National Academies, Institute of Medicine, *Preparing for the Psychological Consequences of Terrorism* (August 2003) (report).

2. FashionLine is a fictitious name, but the case description is based on the author's experience as a consultant to a company in New York after 9/11.
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11. American Psychiatric Association (APA), *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (3d ed.) (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1980).
12. See the following: M. J. Horowitz, “Stress-Response Syndromes: A Review of Posttraumatic and Adjustment Disorders,” *Hospital and Community Psychiatry* 37:3 (1986): 241–9. B. van der Kolk, “The Psychological Consequences of Overwhelming Life Events,” in B. van der Kolk (ed.), *Psychological Trauma* (New York: American Psychiatric Press, 1987). J. Rosen and R. Fields, “The Long-Term Effects of Extraordinary Trauma: A Look beyond PTSD,” *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 2:2 (1988): 179–91. J. L. Titchener, “Post-Traumatic Decline: A Consequence of Unresolved Destructive Drives,” in C. Figley (ed.), *Trauma and Its Wake*, Vol. 2, *Traumatic Stress Theory, Research, and Intervention* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1986), pp. 5–19.

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