

# Managing a Work Group After a Traumatic Event

## Overview

- Managing a work group when employees are suffering from the effects of trauma.
- Seek clear direction from your management
- Be understanding and supportive of your employees' needs
- Remember that you have been affected, too
- Be visible and available to your staff
- Watch for signs that an employee is having trouble coping
- Help employees feel safe and in control of their lives
- Take care of yourself

Traumatic events such as a death in the workgroup, workplace violence, a serious accident at work, an external event such as 9/11, or other disasters that directly or indirectly affect employees can have a profound impact on the workplace.

As a manager, you play a critical and difficult role after a traumatic event. You are asked to lead and motivate employees, help them through the healing process, and make sure that important work gets done and customer needs are served -- all while you're feeling the effects of the trauma yourself. Keep in mind that you are human. You can't do everything and you can't fix every problem. But there are steps you can take to help your employees cope.

## Seek clear direction from your management

- **Find out what is expected of you and your work group**, what allowances are being made because of the recent traumatic events, and what support is available to you.
- **Don't assume that you need to move ahead with business as usual** and push your employees to their usual levels of performance. Your employer needs you and all of your employees to recover. Over the long term, the organization will be better off if you manage in a caring and thoughtful way that allows employees to get back on their feet.

**Seek help and clarification from higher levels of management.** If you are responsible for a critical organizational mission and some employees are not up to the task in the short term, discuss the challenge with your own manager and think together about how to get the work done. Is the work really as important as you think? If it is, can the organization shift resources to help you get the work done? What priorities can you drop or push back in order to get through the current work demands? Don't feel that you have to shoulder the burden of these difficult decisions alone.

## Be understanding and supportive of your employees' needs

- **Acknowledge employees' feelings.** Let people know that you share their sense of loss. It is not a sign of weakness to express your own grief. Rather, it gives permission for employees to talk about their own pain.
- **If you see that an employee is becoming emotional, give him a few minutes of privacy.** Ask if there is anything you can do to help. Remind him of the employee assistance program (EAP) or employee resource program.
- **Expect to face many emotions.** You and your staff may have feelings that shift from one day to the next, including shock, guilt, anger, anxiety, and sadness. Remember that healing takes time and that strong feelings are a normal part of this process. Expect employees to spend time talking with each other and with customers about the recent events.