

Managing Dislocation and Anxiety in the Workplace

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Personal and societal trauma as was experienced by 9/11, the financial crisis of 2008 or the current COVID-19 global health crisis or the war in Europe have a profound impact on workplace productivity, focus and safety. EAP and other programs offered by corporate Human Resources are a great primary resource for critical emotional events. However, such interventions rarely address day to day actions of the overall employee population. Managers play a key role in supporting their teams in staying focused, safe and productive. All the executives I have talked to over the last few days have asked ***“When will our people return to normal?”***

This document addresses basic actions executive teams and managers can take when addressing trauma and anxiety in the workplace.

Common questions asked by managers:

- What can I do as a manager? When do I help?
- What kind of forums should be available? Is it ok to let people express their feelings? Is it ok to stay focused on the job at hand? Who can I turn to?
- What can I do to provide focus and stability?
- What kinds of behavior can we expect?

The challenge of post-traumatic behaviors is that they are so varied. There are however a few rules of thumb:

- Excessive distractibility
- Erratic behaviors not normally associated with a given individual
- Overly rational behaviors such as believing that everything will return to normal soon and just stay the course
- Hyper-focus on minute details of work or tasks and excessive hours at work
- Increased sick or personal leave time
- Increased expression of anger, sadness and frustration

- Increased withdrawal and isolation

Immediate Actions Managers Can Take

- **Be available to your folks.** During times of trauma, anxiety and heightened stress it is essential to make yourself and your management team available to talk and communicate. With distributed teams in lock-down use video chat whenever possible. A friendly face is critical during times like these!
- **Communicate.** Make sure there are consistent messages from all of management expressing real compassion, concern and strength.
- **Provide vehicles for support.** Provide forums for facilitated discussion; encourage your folks to talk to one another and lend each other support. Make available easy access to news reports. If there are mental health professionals on staff, make them available during all shifts and in as many locations as possible.
- **Listen.** Real listening implies the willingness to help and understand. Let folks tell their own story. Recognize that they are not OK. Help them solve the immediate problems at hand.
- **Know your limits.** Know your limits. You are not a mental health professional, even though you might feel like one at times. If you can't solve the immediate problem in a discussion or two, don't hesitate to use the EAP programs or health centers available to you.
- **Be patient.** Recognize that ordinary tasks may take longer. It is likely that project teams may be more easily distracted.
- **Model leadership behavior.** Be compassionate yet focused. Clarify immediate and medium-term actions. Be aware that a sense of safety and well-being is now absent. Set clear expectations. Now more than ever, even your best performers will be unsure and will need genuine reassurance.
- **Keep a positive focus.** Help folks identify with their highest values and the highest values of the enterprise and their communities. Focus on community, contribution and success.

- **Buffer the impact.** Managers must buffer the impact, translate what the unfolding events mean for the individual and the enterprise
- **Respect your folks.** Tell the truth; when folks know the score, they usually rise to the occasion
- **Have a plan.** Do some scenario planning. You must be ready for unanticipated events, lost productivity, logistical delays, staffing issues, corporate and team response to the community, etc. This is a long-term crisis for all concerned. Mobilize your team for action as required with a very clear focus on what is good for your company and good and right for your folks.
- **Be agile and Innovate.** Times of great stress and uncertainty are very fertile grounds for creativity and innovation that can be long lasting.