



# After<sup>the</sup> incident

How to deliver the message to employees and family members about workplace victims

By Laretta Claussen, associate editor

**M**ost employers do everything they can to avoid an accident or injury from striking their workplace. Yet 2007 data from the National Safety Council's 2009 edition of "Injury Facts" indicates 4,689 workers were killed and an additional 3.5 million experienced disabling injuries as a result of unintentional incidents on the job. A serious accident on the job affects not only the victim, but also co-workers, the victim's family and the company as a whole.

"When tragedy strikes the workplace, trust of leadership and a desirable corporate culture are at risk," said Bob VandePol, president of Crisis Care Network, based in Grandville, MI.

A workplace incident has very definite consequences. However, the manner in which an organization handles the crisis will determine whether those consequences are positive or negative. "Some [companies] identify how the incident actually launched a new sense of loyalty, team cohesion and commitment to safe work practices,"

VandePol noted. "Others bemoan the event as triggering a collective negative image, increased conflict and distrust of leadership – 'that's when the wheels fell off.'"

Effective crisis communication is essential to an organization's relationship with its employees. It helps keep them engaged, loyal and, most of all, safe. "Tragedy often begets additional tragedy in the absence of effective communication," VandePol said. "Information helps quell the sense of chaos that accompanies crises and reduces the likelihood of reactive, dangerous behavior."

### **Crafting the message**

Pamela Ferrante, president of the Philadelphia-based consulting firm JC Safety & Environmental Inc., believes honesty is the foundation of effective communication. "The best methods of crisis communication are built upon trust and credibility with the receiver of the message, whoever that is," she said. "I think, in the end, most people appreciate the honesty."

Because emotions tend to run high in the wake of dramatic circumstances such as an employee injury or death, Ferrante strongly recommends mapping out a crisis

communication plan of action. “Develop that process in advance, before the actual message has to be delivered in the event of an emergency,” she said, cautioning that in an emergency situation “emotions are high, and fear and anxiety and all those kinds of human emotions [can] begin to impact a person’s ability to hear a message.”

When crafting a message, its ability to be properly heard depends largely on the mindset and emotional state of the person receiving the message. Messengers need to take into consideration the audience as well as the actual content. “You need to assess where the audience is and where they’re likely to be once they hear that message,” Ferrante said.

Employers also need to carefully consider – in advance of any communication – what additional information employees may seek. “Part of training and preparation should include knowing what might be asked of you,” said Peter Kuchinsky, senior risk management consultant and trainer for the Association of California Water Agencies Joint Powers Insurance Authority in Citrus Heights. He recommended taking the “KISS” approach when drafting a message in a crisis situation: Keep It Simple and Sincere. “Give it to them straight,” he said. Inform employees of “how [the events] will affect them, what they will be expected to do.”

Ferrante recommended organizations carefully walk themselves through each stage of the communication process. First, decide what ought to be shared to determine the content of the message, assess the audience and their likely emotional state, and then “craft the message in such a way that the audience hears the accuracy in the message and understands what they can do.”

Messages about how companies are responding and handling a crisis should be repeated to be sure the message is effectively received.

Kuchinsky suggested that no matter how grim the message, “always end on a positive [note] and the ‘action’ plan.”

### Delivering the news

When it comes to communicating difficult news to employees, timing is everything. “Crisis communication needs to happen immediately and effectively, because what is communicated the first hour after a tragedy offers both tremendous opportunity and serious risk for management



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relationships and outcomes. The incident and its aftermath will not go away if ignored,” VandePol said.

Bruce Blythe, CEO of Atlanta-based Crisis Management International, agreed. He cautioned that delaying the release of accurate information is likely to cause a flurry of rumors and half-truths. “Nature hates a vacuum,” he said. “So if there’s a vacuum with a lack of information on a timely basis ... it gets filled-in in a hurry.” The speed with which rumors can spread has increased significantly in an era in which people are able to communicate instantly through cell phones, text messages, and social networking Websites such as Twitter and Facebook.

Specific communication techniques should be taught to all messengers, VandePol said. “Simple stuff like in the

### Feature at a Glance

An employer’s reaction in the aftermath of a serious workplace injury or death can have a definite impact on the organization and its employees. Ineffective communication could negatively impact workplace safety and put the emotional well-being of workers at risk.

### Key points

- Experts recommend clearly planning communication techniques in advance of an incident. Determine what will be shared with employees, who will deliver the message and how it will be said.
- Honesty is a key component to communications. Organizations should not be afraid of delivering difficult messages to their employees and should not avoid taking responsibility when it is warranted.
- Employees’ emotional well-being should be seriously considered and their concerns addressed. Once the healing has begun, incidents can be valuable to review to help prevent similar occurrences in the future.



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and it's good for business."

Bob VandePol, Crisis Care Network

midst of a crisis to have a firm but soft, slow, compassionate voice; to maintain eye contact; to acknowledge and accept what happened." He said all of these can have an impact on the way the message is received.

Because relaying information about a serious injury or death can be an extremely difficult task, many people may feel a need to make the event seem less dire than it really is. Although the emotional state of the message receivers should be considered, the compulsion to downplay an incident should be avoided.

"I don't think we should ever attempt to over-reassure employees," Ferrante said. "There are some messages that we have to convey to them that are sometimes not pleasant to hear."

She insisted companies should not be afraid to deliver frightening or even threatening messages. "We have to trust our employees to act if we give them accurate information," she added.

When communicating the news of an injury or death, the person delivering the message also should acknowledge the impact the event has had on them personally. The individual injured or killed was a co-worker – and possibly a friend – of theirs as well.

Acknowledging the impact of the event also is partially self-protective for employers, according to VandePol. "People are looking for someone to blame, and if you're saying, 'I'm so sorry about the death of your co-worker, that's got to really be difficult for you. It is for me ...' then it's hard for them to blame you. You're on the same team," he said.

### Assuming and assigning responsibility

Designating responsibility can be difficult waters to tread in the aftermath of a workplace incident. When something goes wrong, people often look to point fingers.

When communicating about a workplace incident, particularly when speaking with the media, employers may be inclined to issue a "no comment" statement. This is a mistake, Kuchinsky said. "It is most important for them to state

that they are working to cooperate in all investigations and will work with authorities on the solutions to prevent future similar events from occurring," he said.

Ferrante agreed. "It's a false message," she said. "People understand that it's a false message, and that trust and credibility is gone."

She continued, "I think companies need to follow [crisis communications] with, 'Here's what we're going to do about it, here's how we're going to fix that problem, here's what you can do about it.'"

Blythe agreed. "When people feel like you're not taking responsibility when you should, they go ballistic," he said, noting that accepting responsibility "is not just about saying, 'Yeah, we made a mistake.'"

Communication with employees should largely follow the same pattern. Ferrante said employees should be aware of – and involved in – future actions the company intends to take in the aftermath of an incident. She believes the best messages in the midst of a crisis are those that inform and compel individuals to take action. "That sort of dual-purpose message," she said, "I think is usually the most effective in a crisis situation."

### Coping and learning

Dealing with getting your organization back on track is only one piece of the puzzle in the aftermath of an incident, VandePol said. Employees' mental and emotional well-being is another major factor to consider and prepare for, and doing so benefits both employees and employers, he said.

"Effective delivery of psychological first aid immediately following critical incidents has been found to address the obvious human loss and also to mitigate exposure to significant financial losses through litigation, workers' comp stress claims, attrition, lost productivity, etc.," VandePol said. "Do the right thing, and it's good for business."

Concern for employees' mental health should begin the same day as the incident, Blythe said. He suggested management meet with employees at the end of the day before workers go home. "Then you screen people to see if they're able to drive ... maybe you provide travel home," he said.

VandePol suggested having counselors available to help employees through a crisis as well. He said training managers and supervisors to recognize symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder can help them identify these behaviors in their workforce. "If managers are able to identify [employee behaviors] as a normal reaction to an abnormal situation, then they are able to relax and to lead."

However, counseling and mental health services should not strictly be made available to lower-level workers. “It’s easy to forget that leaders are people too,” he said, noting that managers and supervisors may also need assistance.

Ferrante pointed out that providing grief counseling can have a positive impact not only on workers’ emotional well-being, but on the safety of the workforce as well. People need to process what has happened, she said, and if companies “don’t help them process it through, they’ll be processing it through the next day at the worksite. I believe that puts them at risk for injuries and incidents because they’re distracted, because they’re worried, because they’re concerned.”

Every workplace injury or death offers a learning opportunity. Ferrante suggested a debriefing not only for fatalities, serious accidents and severe property damage, but also for near misses. By studying incidents that went wrong, companies can learn how to correct them for the future.

According to Ferrante, the process should begin with a thorough incident investigation. “Many companies’ incident investigation processes are lax, and we’re missing opportunities to do a whole lot of preventative activities,” she said. Ferrante recommended involving employees in incident investigations to dig down to the causal factors of incidents and find out how they can be corrected. She also advocates collaborating with employees on a prevention plan.

But however important incident investigations may be, VandePol warned that timing is essential. “If you’re focused upon helping people recover, it’s best for them not to feel like this is an investigation because that only raises defenses,” he said.

Ferrante suggested an incident is not always the best time to conduct a formal training session, but “once the situation calms down, but yet while it’s still fresh in people’s minds, it’s very important to [discuss] lessons learned.” S+H

## Notifying the family

When an employee is seriously injured or killed on the job, it’s not only co-workers who need to be informed – the victim’s family also needs to be notified.

Few resources are available to help companies perform what is an unquestionably difficult task. Delivering news of a death or serious injury to a victim’s family members is “way outside of [a safety professional’s] training and their subject matter expertise,” said Bob VandePol, president of Crisis Care Network.

Although there is no easy way to deliver bad news, measures can be taken to ease the blow. One of the most critical decisions an employer can make is determining who will deliver the news to a victim’s family.

VandePol believes employers often don’t give enough thought to who they will send to deliver the bad news, simply selecting a friendly co-worker of the victim’s and not providing him or her any training on how to proceed. “The ramifications can be negative for the family, for the company and for the person who bears the bad tidings,” VandePol warned.

“You have to carefully select who goes,” he said. “We recommend a team, never one person.” If the news is met by a severe emotional outburst or if a victim’s children are present, one person may not be equipped to handle it.

The team should include a clear leader – someone who has had a good relationship with the victim – and a clergy member, counselor or mental health professional.

“You want to be very careful because a very predictable reaction is blame and anger upon hearing bad news,” VandePol said.

In addition to helping the family cope, a mental health professional can help deliver the news as well. Both the incident and the act of delivering the news can have a serious emotional impact on the messenger, he said, particularly if he or she had a close relationship with the victim.

Peter Kuchinsky, senior risk management consultant and trainer for the Association of California Water Agencies Joint Powers



Insurance Authority in Citrus Heights, pointed out that whatever is said to the family should be said privately – preferably before any information is given out to the media. Tell the victim’s family what information the company intends to release. Although the information given to different outlets can be limited or less specific, “do not put out conflicting messages” between media, family and co-workers, Kuchinsky warned.