

Actions by Leaders Speak Volumes During Times of Crisis

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On June 25, 1996, US Air Force Colonel Douglas Cochran, the 58th Squadron Commander in Saudi Arabia with Operation Southern Watch lost 12 of his airmen and over 120 were wounded. They were two days from rotating back to the States, preparing for room inspections before handing over the facilities and responsibilities to another squadron, when a terrorist explosion ripped through the compound. Acting from “heart consciousness,” Col. Cochran put the needs of his troops and their families in front of his own. As a result of the decisions that he made and actions that he took, families of the deceased as well as the troops themselves maintain relationships with him nearly ten years later.

Acting on the understanding that all humans have the need to feel safe, validated, and connected, Col. Cochran arranged for 150 cots to be brought to the aircraft hangar on the night after the bombing so that all of the men and women could stay together as a unit. The giant hangar filled with cots, luggage and the entire remaining unit, provided a sense of safety and comfort to the traumatized troops. Col. Cochran knew that the group could become more distant or grow closer following the disaster. He knew that meeting basic human needs such as this might draw the group to a more intimate level of connection.

Upon returning to the states, Col. Cochran went to the home of each of the deceased and injured men and women before he went home to his own family. One widow remarked that she was touched beyond words when he came directly to her home in his flight suit. He had just landed at Eglin Air Force Base and had not been home yet to see his own wife and children. On the day following the memorial service Col. Cochran made a point to approach each family whose son or daughter had been killed in the attack. He introduced himself to all of the families and told them that he was responsible for their husband, wife, daughter, or son.

His willingness to accept responsibility for the lives of those who placed great trust in him brought compassion to their hearts. One woman whose young husband had been killed felt a need to console him and let him know that he had not caused the bomb and she did not hold him responsible. The young woman had been married to her twenty-one-year-old husband for four months and three of those he had been deployed in Saudi Arabia with Col. Cochran. In her interview she explained how much it meant to her that the commander had “taken off his rank” when dealing with her and the other families. She went on to explain, “He just became a human being.” Leadership under maximum stress calls for maximum humanity on the part of those in charge of others.

Over nineteen years of interviewing organizational leaders, employees, primary survivors and family members impacted by trauma in the workplace has allowed me to observe leadership under maximum stress from many different perspectives. I have noted several common actions on the part of leaders that consistently garner high marks from their employees and their public. Effective leaders during times of disaster attend to their employees or internal resources immediately. As they stabilize the work force they also model behaviors of compassion and empathy for their employees as well as the public. They empower the employees to emerge as leaders within their own workplace, never usurping their power or demoralizing them.

Attending to Internal Resources

Restoring order and continuity in the workplace begins with a focus on the internal resources—the people within. When those inside an organization regain their equilibrium, this sense of order and composure is passed on to the external world and is felt by the public or customer.

The period of disequilibrium results in emotional/psychological openness or vulnerability for individuals confronted with trauma. This also provides a window of opportunity for leaders to connect with employees in a unique way. In fact, new research on biochemistry during disaster shows that people who experience a trauma together actually secrete a particular hormone. This possibly accounts for the bonding often felt by those who share a tragic event, according to Dr. Candace Pert, Research Professor at Georgetown University Medical School in Washington, DC.

Modeling Compassion and Empathy

In addition to providing for mass-sleeping arrangements, Col. Cochran provided spiritual and emotional counseling resources for anyone who might desire additional support. He did not force anyone to seek professional help, but rather encouraged the chaplain to work on the flight lines beside the men and women who were struggling to pull their lives together.

He also encouraged the families of the deceased to visit the workplace so that they could understand the mission that their deceased family members were involved in at the time of their deaths. He also encouraged the surviving members of the squadron to share stories of the deceased with the family members of those who had been killed. All the while, he met those within the organization as well as those from outside with openness and compassion for what they lost. In doing so, he solidified the relationships that would live on beyond the disaster.

Empowering Others

The following story provides another example of leadership under maximum stress. This leader demonstrates the same characteristics as Colonel Cochran but with different circumstances. The story also provides an example of the importance of empowering one's employees in times of tragedy.

As the young manager approached the terminal building, he looked for the arrival flight that customarily sat at the gate each evening around midnight. It was not there. Looking out toward the river, far down the taxiway, he saw flames leaping from an airplane. He had been called back to work because of a “problem” with a flight. He now knew he was facing an airline manager's worst nightmare. The arrival flight had crashed and it was burning out of control.

Rushing into his office, he pulled the loads (specifics of who and what is on an aircraft) for the flights—it was a full airplane! This meant that over 100 passengers and crew were involved. While fire and rescue personnel worked to extinguish the fire and hopefully save the passengers and crew, the small group of employees on duty tried to calm the nearly hysterical public who were awaiting the arrival of the people on board the burning airplane.

Sitting in his tiny office behind the ticket counter with one employee who had actually been to the airplane and could describe the horror of the situation, the manager called headquarters to explain the scenario. He knew that his voice was being heard on speakerphone by scores of executives in a large conference room known as the command center located in the home offices. Trying to remain composed, he recognized a voice he later referred to as “the icon.” He froze.

The voice was that of the vice chairman of the airline, a highly respected, if not revered man whose name alone commanded respect. This executive had presided over numerous previous crashes during his career and he was known for his calm, professional leadership style that younger managers heard about but seldom got to observe first-hand. Realizing that “the man” was on the phone, talking to him, asking questions and calling him by his first name, made the magnitude of the disaster even more real and overwhelming. Picturing the large room designated “war” for its use during crash response, the manager realized that *his city, his airport, his workplace* had become the focal point of the entire airline---and *he* was in charge! He knew that the men in the home office were trying to learn the details of the crash in order to put a giant, well-rehearsed plan, involving literally hundreds of people in motion. The men and women in the command center needed to hear from him in order to put the plan into action --but he could not find his voice!

The manager sat in silence while officials at corporate headquarters asked questions and made attempts to get him to respond. He could not answer. Then he heard the executive call his name. He instructed the young manager to write down a phone number. He then instructed him to put down the phone that was connected to the crash conference call line. He told him to call back on a different line. The executive assured him that when he called back, he would be speaking to him alone—away from the others in the command center. Still not speaking, the manager followed his instructions. He dialed the number. As he had promised, the executive answered his phone and began to speak in a quiet, calm voice.

“Look, you are involved in a terrible situation and you don’t have the people to do it. You don’t have the resources to do it. I have been there (at the airport/station level). I have run stations. What I am going to ask you to do is to think about the passengers, the survivors, and your employees, and they need you. So go out and do what you have to with those three priorities in mind. I am here for you every minute of this process, which will go on for many years. I will always be available for you.”

The manager thanked him and hung up the phone. He then picked up the conference call phone and began to perform the duties that he had been trained to do. The fear that had paralyzed him had been replaced with confidence that his predicament was understood and that “the man” had empathy and compassion for his plight.

Wisdom in Leadership

I asked the executive why he chose to handle the “frozen” response by the manager this way. Not surprisingly, he told me that he had been in similar situations. He explained that had he used an approach without empathy and compassion, it would not have produced the desired results for either him or the manager—and certainly not for those who needed the local leadership that only the manager could provide. He spoke the truth when he said that everyone needed the manager as the local leader to respond. No one in the world knew more about the city, the people and

the local resources than that manager. Other employees have shared stories where the officer in charge of the crash response usurped his power, causing the corporation to lose valuable, if not critical local resources.

Handbook for Human Services Response: A Practical Approach for Helping People contains interviews with both leaders in this article along with interviews with the head of crisis response for Amtrak, the trauma response coordinator for more than 30 hospitals in South Africa, and the national coordinator of the Police Family Liaison Officer program for the New Scotland Yard in the United Kingdom. The book also contains interviews and stories of passenger and family survivors of mass transportation and military disasters as well as the employees who responded to them. All of the interviews and stories are woven around a practical approach for leading, assisting and supporting others during disaster. The book can be ordered from www.higherresources.com.