

Managing in Times of Terrorism, War, and World Uncertainty

Overview

Ways to support employees during times of world uncertainty.

- Plan your helping strategy
- Provide factual information
- Watch for behavior changes
- Deal with the impact of continuing work group anxiety
- Manage bias during times of stress

World events such as terrorism and war can trigger strong emotional reactions, from fear and sadness to anger and confusion. During times of world uncertainty, many employees turn to their managers for leadership and reassurance. Below are suggestions on how you can manage in a thoughtful and caring way during this time.

Plan your helping strategy

A war and world uncertainty will have an effect on employees across the nation. Planning ahead can help you anticipate ways to offer support.

- *“Take the temperature” of your work group.* Talk to employees about the war and gain a better understanding of their concerns. Ask open-ended questions like, “What concerns you the most about . . .?” “How is your family doing with all this?” “What would you find most helpful?” Think about what’s possible to implement given your available staff and resources.
- *Be prepared for personal disclosures about family life, personal, or financial problems.* Some employees may be struggling with deployment of a family member or friend. Some may have been directly impacted by a terrorist activity. Problems an employee may already be struggling with may become amplified during a crisis. Show your concern and support. But don’t try to solve employees’ problems. Help employees maintain their boundaries with you and co-workers by directing them to the appropriate resources. Remind employees that the employee assistance program (EAP) or employee resource program is available to help with personal and work issues. Provide employees with information on how to contact the program.
- *Maintain balance and normalcy.* Continue to attend to the needs of the business while being sensitive to the needs of each employee.

Provide factual information

Providing employees with resources, concrete information, and answers to questions will help calm fears.

- *Review with employees the security measures that have been put in place by your organization.* Are there new security measures they should know about? Are there any restrictions on travel?
- *Share resources and information.* Let employees know what the company policy is on military leave. Describe the company resources that are available to help with backup child care, care for an older relative, and with personal and work issues.

Tell employees how to contact the human resources department for answers to questions you may not have answers to about company policies.

- *Make sure employees know where to go for emergency assistance.* Develop and distribute a card or list that includes reliable local emergency numbers as well as work-related contact information that the employee will want to use during an emergency of any kind. Discuss openly any plans the department or organization may have for disseminating information to employees. Again, make sure everyone knows about the company's EAP or employee resource program.

Watch for behavior changes

Part of your role as a manager is to be attentive to the needs of your employees and to recognize when someone is struggling or may need professional help or a referral to the EAP or employee resource program. Here are some ways you can offer support to employees:

- *Be visible and available to your staff.* Leadership presence is reassuring and reinforces both normalcy and focus. Practice "management-by-walking-around." Spend extra time with your team or staff. Remember to ask, "Are you OK?" "Is there anything you need?" Even a simple question like, "How are you feeling today?" shows an employee that you care. And it can give you a sense of whether someone is having a difficult time.
- *Don't assume everyone is distressed.* Be prepared for humor and the usual chatter that happens at work. If problems are expressed, listen. Feel free to express your own reactions to a situation. Consider sharing the way you have worked through a problem. Although the world situation may be serious, the mood in the office doesn't have to be grim or somber. Try -- respectfully -- to "lighten things up."
- *Watch for signs of depression, anger, and anxiety among employees.* These include a drop in productivity, outbursts of anger, making more mistakes than usual, loss of energy or interest in ordinary activities, changes in appetite or weight, memory difficulties, and frequent crying episodes. Remind the employee that confidential help is available through the EAP or employee resource program.
- *Model the behavior you would like to see in others.* A sense of calm and control at the top will help to set the right tone for your work group. Be aware of your own reactions and behaviors and how they might influence others.
- *Take care of yourself.* Be sure to share your worries with trusted colleagues. Don't forget to tap your usual outlets for pleasure and exercise. If you do that, you will have the energy and stamina you need to take care of others.

Deal with the impact of continuing work group anxiety

Weeks or months of anxiety around world events that we can't control can take its toll on teams, work, and productivity.

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- *Get clear direction from management about what is expected of your work group.* If the crisis deepens you will want to confer with management continually about work and productivity goals. “Business as usual” may require adjustments. Setting goals together and sustaining normalcy in the workplace will be an emotional anchor for many employees.
- *Help employees stay focused on the job.* While some distraction may be expected during times of war and world uncertainty, it’s important to try to maintain routines at work as much as possible. Remind workers of the day’s tasks or productivity expectations. Point out specific projects or tasks an employee can work on. Keep people focused on specific things they can do -- on the things over which they have some control.
- *Listen sympathetically.* Realize you may become a target for frustration and anxiety. Don’t take this personally. The best way to defuse a situation is to remain calm and nonjudgmental in your response. Keep your voice soft. Maintain direct eye contact if you are having a face-to-face discussion with an employee who is upset. Summarize what you hear and provide concrete advice.
- *Step in if discussions about politics, war, or the world situation get tense at work.* If discussions get heated or argumentative, take vocal people aside and let them know that their behavior is affecting the workplace. Ask them to continue their discussion after work.
- *Be especially sensitive to the needs and issues of employees who may have loved ones actively involved in the war effort.* They may have special concerns or anxiety that is not shared by other workers. Make a special effort to express interest and offer support.

Manage bias during times of stress

Your role as a manager is to provide a work culture that is respectful and supportive of all employees. This is especially true during times of crisis, when stress levels are higher at work, tensions are greater, and tempers can flare.

- *Watch for bias and racist attitudes or actions.* When we all feel powerless, there is a natural tendency to want to find someone or something to blame. It is never all right for an employee to be targeted because of his race or ethnicity.
- *Intervene when public discussions or individual actions target a person or minority group.* Educate and try to reason with people who are stereotyping or blaming people unfairly. Ask people to recognize the pressures and tension that are present because of world uncertainty, terrorism, or war. Do not tolerate inappropriate behavior in the workplace.
- *Create small discussion groups for employees who may feel targeted.* Enable them to share ways to cope. Offer your support and find out how you can help.

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- *As always, avoid scheduling meetings or parties during religious holidays.* If you aren't sure when these holidays are, check with people on your team.
- *Help employees learn about and be respectful of people's values, beliefs, dietary restrictions, and preferences.*
- *Involve the EAP or your HR representative if anyone is harassed or threatened.* This includes verbal comments, written comments, or behavior that is meant to annoy, disturb, or frighten another person. A thorough investigation should be launched. Offer support to the victim through the EAP.
- *Thank employees who are trying to support and maintain a community feeling during these difficult times.* Create a bulletin board or public display that includes sayings, pictures, or cartoons about community, courage, building the team, staying the course, etc. Share ideas about how to keep morale high. Act on those ideas.
- *Consider whether celebrations of success could be offensive to some employees.* For some people, a military action could be seen favorably, but for others, it might be seen as an offense to their country-of-origin or their religious or political beliefs.
- *Find out about your organization's official policies about clothing, placards, flags, or buttons displaying a political or patriotic message.* Some organizations may limit employees from wearing or carrying items that express opinions during work hours. Others have rules or guidelines about what is appropriate.

During times of war and world uncertainty, the opportunity exists to create an even stronger community in your workplace. You can help that happen by providing employees with the support they need to do their jobs and by being attentive to people's needs. Remember to take care of yourself during this time as well. Understand that the worst times will certainly pass and routines we once took for granted -- and ones we now appreciate even more -- will be restored.