

What The Leader Needs To Know: Preparing Your First Responders For A Crisis

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The Opportunity

Have you ensured that the first responders in your enterprise are mentally and emotionally prepared to perform during and after a crisis? If not, the ability of your organization to recover from a crisis is at risk.

Most often the term “first responders” is used in reference to public emergency service personnel typically police, fire and EMS. The term refers to those called upon to immediately respond to an emergency. The reactions and behaviors of these individuals play a significant role in limiting the loss of life and destruction of buildings, equipment and materials.

In large organizations, corporate or non-profit, first responders are in departments that span the organization.¹ Experts report that in the post-September 11th environment the demands on these individuals and the dependency of their organizations on their performance have changed dramatically. For instance, one report notes² “...service personnel have been given added and more complex responsibilities ...need to be vigilantly prepared for large scale, mass-casualty events...should these events occur...(they) are tasked with unprecedented, enormous, and sustained personal and professional challenges.”

Certainly you have increased the technical training, table top, and full scale drills that your first responders participate in. However, findings as noted above, point to how essential it is to provide your first responders with the competencies and support to manage the mental and emotional demands of their roles. Through terrible experiences from September 11th to random shootings to historic natural disasters we have learned that the ability of first responders to think and respond to unforeseen circumstances is the critical determinant of an effective response.

Most first responders will experience some level of mental and emotional stress in responding to any significant crisis. Most will manage this stress independently and successfully over time. Keep in mind that in the short term, absent strong coping skills, these stresses will decrease their performance and judgment in responding to a crisis. Further, there is evidence that those responding to a terrorist attack are much more susceptible to developing Acute Stress Disorder and the longer-term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.³ This means the risk to your organization has increased. Those organizations that respond most effectively to a crisis will return to and perhaps exceed former performance levels.

The skills and support your first responders need to bring your organization back on line are identified and can be affordably developed and provided.

How To Leverage It

1. Adopt A Four Phase Approach To Preparing First Responders To Minimize Emotional & Mental Stresses

A four phase approach is recommended by leading authorities⁴ and consists of the following.

- Policy Development
- Building Coping Skills & Resilience
- Enabling Crisis Response
- Post-Crisis Support

The first two phases are both often overlooked and paradoxically where the most value can be obtained. It's in these two phases that you can do the most to ensure the recovery and on-going performance of your organization.

2. Policy Development

Our recommendation is given their special responsibilities, risks and stresses that you establish policies that provide a higher level of support and consideration to first responders than to other employees. Here are just some that should be considered.

- *Communication To First Responder Significant Others*
One of the most powerful determinants of performance under stress is the presence of social support. In a crisis situation the first responders significant others will either encourage them to stay engaged in the crisis response or to withdraw.

Significant others will encourage and support engagement to the degree they feel knowledgeable about what is happening and the steps being taken to ensure the safety and well-being of the responder.

This policy should place a senior manager in charge of communicating with first responders significant others on an on-going basis. This individual should have protocols and access to technology to make this communication available in real time and as efficient as possible. Conference calls, websites and emails should all be pre-scheduled and scripted.

The policy should also allow for significant others to get messages to first responders when personal needs dictate.

In addition, to using technology, a team of managers should be sent to pre-selected offsite locations to meet with significant others in person. This is particularly important when the crisis response will be of long duration.

- *Expanded Medical & EAP Services*
A crisis situation may well require the expansion of medical and EAP services to support all employees. The organizations and/or individuals who will be used to expand these services should be trained in Critical



Incidence Stress Management, prescreened, and participate in practice drills. Credentials should be communicated to first responders and significant others prior to a crisis occurring.

▪ *Compensation Continuity*

Depending on the severity of the crisis and the resources of the organization, it may be necessary to furlough, lay-off or otherwise interrupt compensation to employees. A policy should be established on how, to what level and under what circumstances such actions will be taken.

First responders should be designated and excluded from such disruptions to their compensation. This may seem obvious but absent a clear policy, first responders performing heroically on behalf of the organization have found their financial security threatened.

▪ *Emergency Financial Authority*

Despite the best of contingency planning, crises will present unanticipated circumstances. First responders need the ability to purchase goods and services on an immediate basis in order to perform their duties and maintain their well being.

All first responders should have a reasonable ability to expend funds for emergency transportation, food, supplies and equipment.

▪ *Mandatory Rest Periods*

First responders should be required to work no more than 12 hours on followed by a minimum of 12 hours rest. This is critical to their safety and well-being as well as their availability to meet the organization's recovery needs.

▪ *First Responder Leave Policy*

The common signs of acute stress are most often not a sign of a psychological illness or long-term reaction such as PTSD. They can often be managed effectively if the responder can leave the crisis environment when these reactions threaten to become overwhelming. However, most first responders out of a sense of obligation and fear of stigma will resist taking advantage of sick time or medical leave. Therefore, it is prudent to provide the ability of first responders to take a short leave of 3 – 5 days without accessing these other forms of leave. At the end of this brief period they may well find their coping and resilience returned. If not, they will be more likely to agree to the typical medical or sick leave.

These are some policies to put in place to ensure the performance and well being of your first responders.

3. Building Coping Skills & Resilience

All people in response to a crisis will find ways of coping. There is a known set of coping skills and behaviors that build and maintain resilience. The need is to educate and train responders in effective skills and behaviors to prevent them from using those that may create rather than resolve stress and long-term adjustment.

Skills and behaviors can be outlined in written communication. However, to ensure their effective and

consistent use they should be practiced on a regular basis. This will have the added benefit of improving the first responders performance in their normal duties.

Coping and resilience behaviors can be built into existing training exercises and drills. However, the use of online scenarios is highly recommended for building these skills. Online scenarios provide the following advantages:

- Affordability vs. traditional training
- Scalability allowing large numbers to receive training with minimal increased investment
- Ability to include confidential, self-assessment of coping skills
- Online coaching & peer communication embedded in the learning
- Flexibility to add multiple crisis scenarios as needs and threat levels change
- Modeling of these behaviors by scenario characters
- Participation based on individual availability

This article has focused on the first two steps in a four phase approach to preparing your first responders to handle the mental and emotional stresses of responding to a crisis and returning your organization to normal performance levels. In a future article, we will review the remaining two phases. Again, we suggest that the greatest value will result from investing in the first two phases.

¹ Included are employees in: security; healthcare; fire safety; technology; environmental services; EAP; building engineering; communications; human resources; and transportation.

² Fostering Resilience in Response To Terrorism: A Fact Sheet for Psychologists Working With First Responders, APA Task Force On Resilience in Response To Terrorism, American Psychological Association. Retrieved from www.apa.org. Retrieved July 2004

³ Follow up studies from the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City as well as the September 11th New York attack suggest that first responders are significantly less likely to manage the stress independently.

⁴ See note 2 above.

About The Author

Leo F. Flanagan, Jr., Ph.D. is President of Flanagan Consultants, LLC. He has more than 25 years experience in increasingly challenging and successful assignments across the globe. He has a Ph.D. in psychology and has assisted communities, organizations and individuals in responding to a wide range of natural and human made crises including violence, tornadoes and the September 11th attacks on New York City. Flanagan Consultants, LLC helps leading companies formulate and execute their business, marketing, human resources and crisis response strategies. Clients include leaders in financial services, consumer products, hospitality, pharmaceuticals, government, and retailing. Leo can be reached directly at 203-321-8423 or Leo@FlanaganConsultants.com.