



## After the Attacks: How Can an Employer Respond?

A year later, the extraordinary events of Sept. 11 that affected so many, continue to have profound, lingering effects on a workforce concerned with the stalled economy, leading into the holiday season. Where are Long Island businesses likely to see this?

- employees who continue to live with fear and anxieties are not likely to volunteer for new responsibilities and are more likely to make mistakes;
- business meetings are less likely to be productive and new product and service ideas are less likely to be generated;
- potential business problems may not be identified;
- absenteeism and employee turnover is likely to increase as will the time needed to learn new skills;
- decisions and problem-solving gets pushed "upstairs" and generally, new opportunities for enhanced customer or vendor relationships are lost.

What can a concerned employer do to minimize this impact on valued employees and their contributions to a company's health? First, if your company has never established ground rules for open communication, this would be a good time to start. Create a safe, accepting environment for employees to share pain, fear, anger and despair such as team meetings, access to a counselor or coach, discussions with a manager. Giving vulnerability a safe outlet increases resilience and aptitude for action. Keeping emotions bottled up increases tension and anxiety. Additionally, you may want to increase the frequency of regular communications with employees through meetings, newsletters, memos and so forth. Provide accurate and full information about company developments. Combat the stress that comes from not knowing what's going on. Paradoxically, crisis can become fuel for businesses and employees to take control of their future and adapt quickly to changes so they flourish in the new conditions. Here are some Ideas for challenging your workforce to move forward on the foundation of a crisis.

- 1) Normalize and reframe responses to the crisis. When you hear anxiety and frustration about what has happened ask your employees: How could our business emerge from this crisis even stronger than before? What new opportunities are you sensing now?
- 2) Relieve guilt and give meaning to the sacrifices of those who died or were hurt in the crisis. Suggest honoring those who perished or were hurt by getting back to work quickly and building a nation that's even stronger than before.

How can an Employer Respond?

- 1) Assist employees to take action and stop feelings of helplessness. Review possible safety and control actions at the workplace. Invite your staff to suggest ways to increase their sense of security and control. Use these changes and suggestions as an opportunity to communicate with all your employees; show your responsiveness to a changed business environment and to their concerns and ideas.
- 2) Identify ways business clients have changed: What are you doing differently now than you did before the crisis? Tell your employees how you're maintaining your enthusiasm for marketing the business and focusing on the bottom line. Help your employees or clients to bring that positive image to fruition.
- 3) Identify ways the workplace has changed: Are staff members able to concentrate and stay focused on business? What changes are you seeing in the number or kind of orders your clients are placing now? What about your and your family? Your life has changed, too. Let your staff know this and that you want to know what's happened for them off the job.
- 4) Respect and honor positive changes from the crisis: Ask your staff to describe how their values or priorities have shifted since the crisis. What positive changes have they noticed in our nation since the tragedy occurred? What acts of courage have inspired them? How have they funneled anger into

constructive actions that benefit others, themselves, the business? How can you be a better company, a better employer through this crisis? How can your staff contribute?

- 5) Inspire new visions of the future. Instill in your employees that they can choose how to adapt to this crisis and create a future. Ask: What are the smartest ways we can redesign our business? Describe the first step you could take toward that future. How do your new visions for yourself and your business correspond with your primary values? How could you thoroughly engage your outrage about this crisis and harness that energy to build a remarkable new life for yourself, your employees and your business?
- 6) Rebuild a sense of empowerment. One of the most psychologically devastating aspects of a disaster is the sense of having lost control over life. Encouraging a change of attitude from victim to survivor is central to mitigating subsequent emotional difficulties and loss of productivity on the job. Employees should be encouraged to participate in making decisions that affect the business and to take part in implementing them. This focuses your staff on "I CAN," not on the immense "I CANNOT".

How can an Employer Respond?

- 1) Connect business clients with others who are moving forward: Who among your employees, vendors or customers inspires you the most in difficult times and shows backbone when others are trembling? Where do you find people who stand up against fear and forge goodness out of destruction? Create a 'courage team' of these people – recognize them, discuss and write about their actions and responses to the attacks.
- 2) Address other needs: Make sure your staff is making time to exercise, sleep, eat well, have fun and take care of themselves. If possible, offer memberships or referrals to healthcare professionals, coaches, nutritionists, personal trainers, wellness information, gyms and so forth. With these actions, you will move out of paralysis and the actions you take will carry a constructive and restoring power. They will be RESPONSIVE, not REACTIVE acts. They will not seek to escape the horror, but defy it. Each successful act will chip away at the background emotion of helplessness and hopelessness. It will rekindle and fuel your ability to take increasingly bigger steps as they become available. It also sets the stage for a move from crisis mode to a recovery and rebuilding mode. And, it will reinforce the bonds of your employees to the health and mission of their firms.

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