Helping Your Workplace Heal

By CompassionLab ((See http://www.compassionlab.com/), Jane E. Dutton, Jason Kanov, Jacoba Lilius, Sally Maitlis, Monica Worline)

At a time of crisis or tragedy, acting on the values of the organization becomes particularly important. Traumatic events facing an organization bring into sharp focus the true operating values in a workplace system. These prescriptions were originally written in the wake of the attacks on New York City in 2001, but they have broad applicability for healing in the wake of all kinds of trauma and tragedy.

Our research suggests several ways you can use the values of your organization to communicate in a manner that is both helpful and effective at a time of crisis or tragedy:

- **Emphasize humanity and the worth of people as whole human beings.** Work is only one important part of a full human life. Work routines are very important to people, and often getting back to work is helpful. With the call to "get back to work," however, some people will feel they are being asked to separate their work and personal lives at a time when that is impossible. Work organizations that value whole human beings make it easier for people to be at work, knowing they do not have to set aside their pain.

- **Emphasize the flexibility in the system.** This will allow people who are the most deeply affected to feel free to ask for help, and will call forth voluntary extra effort from people who have more to give. In this way, a system that values people can give flexibility to those who are in pain without losing its ability to function at a high level.

- **Emphasize the value of the organization as a community.** Work organizations are among people's primary communities of support. At a time of tragedy, people often find comfort and worth in coming together. In the wake of tragedy that threatens to tear apart our social fabric, people will take great comfort and feel less uncertain about their own lives if the workplace offers them a chance to come together with others and to acknowledge what has happened.

- **Emphasize the range of emotions that are normal during a tragedy.** People may feel deep sorrow, anxiousness, uncertainty, anger or steely resolve. A wide range of emotions is a normal consequence of a traumatic event. When leaders emphasize that a wide range of emotions is normal, it allows people more freedom to use their emotions as a part of their work, instead of spending energy ignoring them.

- **Emphasize the organization's core values.** Each organization will have a different set of core values that guide the response to a tragedy or crisis. People in the organization will look to these values as a framework in which they can act. Emphasizing these values and the way they are guiding the organization's response will free people to think creatively about the values and how they fit within them.

"Back-to-Work" Routines Provide Aid

Routines translate energy into action. People can use their everyday work routines to create constructive responses to pain. For example, our research lab has documented an organization that used their payroll routines to get money quickly to earthquake survivors. In the wake of the tragedy in New York and Washington, we saw organizations use their advertising routines to respond to the suffering and communicate their willingness to help. Everyone in the organization-leader or not-can improvise on the "back-to-work" routines to respond to pain:

- **Use routines to improvise local responses.** People often feel helpless about what to do after a tragedy. Using regular work as a way to respond can create a feeling of effectiveness, because a local response to a distant tragedy is immediately beneficial. For example, we documented a student network organization that began to organize rides to the airport for affected students, using their regular network routines that would usually be used to accomplish other purposes, and giving students a sense of efficacy in the face of tragedy.
Use routines to gather people into communities. Work organizations have many ways of getting teams together and calling meetings. These regular facets of work can be used to gather people together for acknowledging what happened or for creating community. For example, we documented an organization that dedicated one meeting space as a “grieving space,” and provided a television where employees could come together to talk or to learn about the latest developments in the tragedy.

Use regular communication channels to coordinate helping. People can monitor their work system for places that it is stretched thin, and can use their regular communication channels to communicate where people need the most help. When members who are in pain have offers of help, it will allow them greater flexibility. This use of regular work coordination to call for help allows the organization to provide flexibility in an agile, fast manner, and to customize help to where it is needed most.

Expect emergent action from people closest to the suffering. Work routines often can be adapted best by people who are closest to those who are suffering. If an organization attends to this emergent action and offers to support those who see how the organization can help, the organization can use its resources to create a careful and customized compassionate response.

The Importance of Networks in the Organization

Sometimes the most powerful resource an organization has to offer is its ability to link people with others. The networks of relationships in the organization can be a great source of strength in providing a compassionate response to a tragedy. Thinking of the organization as a system of smaller networks of people with different strengths can often help generate ideas and resources to aid those who are suffering.

Use local networks in the organization to find resources. When people are suffering, there is often a need for specific resource that would help them. For example, one organization we studied had a network of women members who were able to donate specific items of clothing quickly in response to a fire. The same organization had access to a network of Realtors, and even though the Realtors were not members of the organization they were immediately willing to help find housing for those displaced by the fire.

Use networks to generate ideas. When people feel helpless in the wake of a large tragedy, it is often difficult to know how to help. Making use of an organization’s networks to call for ideas about how to respond, and even including customers or outsiders, can generate creative responses that will make a difference in the local community.

Use networks to connect populations that don’t usually coordinate. In many organizations there are pockets of people who work on different projects or goals and who don’t regularly coordinate with one another. Connecting these pockets of people together through communication networks or by suggesting they meet with one another can help foster a compassionate response by generating more resources, energy and help than would otherwise be available. We documented one teacher who used her class as a gathering place for students to suggest ways the school faculty could respond to their needs. In essence she was linking two disparate networks in the organization to help it coordinate well in response to the crisis. These disparate networks can often inspire one another; for example, when one group learns about what others in the organization are doing, that group may begin to see more ideas about what they can offer.

Use networks to keep people informed. Of course people want to know what is going on in a tragedy situation, and to know what the organization’s response will be. In response to an earthquake, one organization used employee networks to set up a phone tree system, which they used to check on employee safety and recovery daily.

Why Compassion Counts in Organizations

In our research, we have seen employees talk about the power that compassionate responses organized by their workplaces have in their lives. In some cases, employees have tearfully told stories about events that happened over a decade ago. In other cases, sadly, we have heard stories of deep pain from people who suffered tragedies and received no response, or even a punishing response, from their workplaces. Organizations, as systems of activity, can make a huge difference in people’s ability to recover from events such as these. Though we often assume compassion is “natural,” we have seen that it takes skill and focused activity to ensure an organization responds in a compassionate manner.

When organizations use their values, routines and networks to create the capacity for compassion, the organizations amplify what any one person could do alone. Organizations can become, in essence, healing systems that respond to people’s pain. When this happens, the people in that system are transformed.
- **Compassionate responses create attachment to the organization.** People who talk about working in a compassionate environment invariably also talk about the importance of their work and their commitment to the job and the employer. Stories about compassionate responses often attract people to an organization as well.

- **Compassionate responses create resilience in the organization.** Organizations that are nimble in response to tragedy or trauma help to generate additional effort from some to make up for reduced effort from others—in essence maintaining a high-performance capability even while allowing people flexibility. In addition, because they allow people the flexibility and emotional responses necessary for healing, they create resilience in people and bounce back from losses more quickly.

- **Compassionate responses generate ongoing capability in the system.** When people in the organization experience the healing capacity of the system, they also learn and generate response capability that can be put to use in their day-to-day work and in response to other events that affect the organization. People in the workplace meet new colleagues, learn new routines and re-establish the importance of the values of the organization as they respond to a trauma. This learning builds the ongoing capability of the organization as a whole.

Our research documents that compassion counts in organizations—both in terms of the human face behind every job and in terms of the ability the whole system has to create and sustain high-level performance.