

How Prepared are Your Clients for the NEXT Crisis?

With the many twists and turns of the COVID-19 pandemic in a world that was *already* filled with stress and anxiety, it has never been more obvious that every organization is at risk for traumatic disruption.

No one can control everything, but here are some suggestions for EAP practitioners to help mitigate the damage, begin the healing process, AND prepare corporate clients for the NEXT crisis, which surely is not a matter of “if,” but “when.”

Diana Hendel, PharmD and Mark Goulston, MD, co-authors of *Trauma to Triumph: A Roadmap for Leading Through Disruption and Thriving on the Other Side* (HarperCollins Leadership, March 2021, \$17.99), say from now on we can expect one disruptive crisis after another.

“Eventually, trauma will impact your company,” says Dr. Goulston. “It’s not *if*, it’s *when*—and the *when* is sooner than you think. COVID is the most obvious example, but it is not the last. We all face a new era of uncertainty, and we need to be prepared to handle it.”

Pandemic isn’t the Only Disruptor

Over the past few decades, organizations have been rocked by technological shake-ups, shifting consumer habits, and political and social unrest, not to mention internal upheavals like harassment, violence, scandal, and more. That is why Drs. Hendel and Goulston say careful preparation is a must.

“Organizations that will stand the test of time are those that put a plan in place to deal with the kinds of disasters that could create traumatic stress in their people and destabilize their culture,” says Dr. Hendel.

‘Must Haves’ for a Preparedness Plan

What should such a plan look like? While it will vary from company to company, and is too comprehensive to describe here, Hendel and Goulston share a few of the “must haves” for EAPs to share and discuss with their corporate clients.

❖ **Get a firm grasp on the difference between trauma and stress.** While *stress* upsets our balance in the moment, we still maintain a feeling of control over our lives. Most of us deal with routine stress daily and can manage it (up to a point, anyway). *Trauma*, on the other hand, overwhelms our self-protective structure and sends us scrambling for survival. It leaves us vulnerable, helpless, and groundless. It shatters our sense of safety, security, and changes how we look at the world. And unaddressed, it can result in long-term harm.

EXERCISE: *Ask employees, managers, and supervisors how THEY would define trauma. Do they understand the difference?*

❖ **Launch a rapid response process the moment a crisis occurs.** You might think of this as a “Code Blue.” It is a standardized, pre-planned approach for dealing with disruption. Getting one in place helps everyone know exactly what to do so that decisions can be made quickly, efficiently, and with a focus on safety. Here are the components to focus on:

➤ *Form a rapid response team.* Appoint people to this team before a crisis happens and make sure they know their respective roles. It should include all senior leaders and leaders of key functions such as operations/logistics, security, finance, HR, communications/PR, etc.

➤ *Allow the leader in charge to delegate.*

The organization will need a central commander to manage response activities such as assigning personnel, deploying equipment, obtaining additional resources, etc. This leader must be fully present, visible, and available in the heat of crisis.

➤ *Have the team report to the command center.* This is a pre-determined location (physical and/or virtual) for monitoring and reacting to events. You should also select a CODE WORD that puts the rapid response process into action.

➤ *Gather relevant information.* In a crisis it is critical to centralize information, facts, and data. What is known? What is not known? The goal is to organize and coordinate response activities, ensuring that the most pressing needs are met and that resources are properly allocated.

➤ *Promote a unifying message.* It is vital to deliberately shape and disseminate a message of unity. Make sure your message is one of “we are all in it together.” This helps people transcend the impulse to split into factions.

EXERCISE: *How can the EAP and HR work together to help develop this plan? Would presenting “the basics” such as above in a lunch-and-learn setting first help get the ball rolling?*

➤ **Name, claim, and frame trauma from the onset.** This helps everyone understand what is happening to individuals and to the group. It gives us the language to talk about it so that everyone is on the same page. It helps people say “Aha, this is why I am feeling so bad!” And it gives everyone permission to finally seek real help. *The EAP can make a HUGE difference in this regard!*

❖ **Know the “red flags” of traumatized employees.** When people are traumatized, they

experience the “fight, flight, freeze” survival response. This is the body’s natural response to danger that enables us to defend ourselves or flee to safety or freeze as a means of survival (much like playing dead in the animal kingdom). Fight, flight, freeze can manifest in different ways. Some people might become hostile, belligerent, aggressive, or otherwise “difficult”—often seemingly without adequate cause. Others might cling to their “competence zone,” blindly doing what they have always done even though it no longer works. People dig in and resist change. Or they may insist they are “fine,” even when it is clear they are struggling.

“When trauma shows up at your front door, the sooner you take action, the sooner you can make things right—and the sooner your employees can be on the road to healing.”

“Meanwhile, leaders may behave in distinctively un-leaderly ways as well,” notes Dr. Goulston. “They might hide out in their office instead of jumping into action, or else make rash, knee-jerk decisions when they were previously known for levelheaded steadiness.”

Again, the EAP can serve a vital role.

❖ **Leverage the power of the 4th F.** Employee assistance professionals are already familiar with the Fight/Flight/Freeze response, but they may not know about the lesser known “fourth F.” This stands for *friend*. It represents the bonding that occurs in response to trauma due to the presence of oxytocin (the “love” hormone that fuels friendships). This hormone causes people to bond in the aftermath of trauma. If leaders can leverage this camarade-

rie early on it can bring the entire organization together. However, if they fail to do this, the fourth F can work against the organization as individuals bond with likeminded co-workers and end up splitting into factions. People begin to question other peoples' motives and start taking sides. This division can lead to deep polarization.

EXERCISE: *What kind of relationships typically exist between employees and employer? Positive? Contentious? If the latter, this step may involve some real work!*

❖ **Use “both/and” to stop post-trauma polarization.** When a traumatic event occurs, opposing views can divide the organization. People believe the right course of action is either “A” or “B.” They see themselves as right and the other side as wrong. Leaders succumb to pressure and choose one option over the other (say, Choice A). When the downsides of that action appear, they reverse courses and go to the other extreme. Naturally, the downsides of Choice B then appear...and leaders swing back to Choice A. With every swing of the pendulum division deepens. This is incredibly damaging to your culture.

“A ‘BOTH/AND’ mindset helps us manage polarization,” says Dr. Hendel. “Instead of approaching issues with an *either/or* mentality, organizations can leverage both sides of these polarities with a *both/and* approach. The idea is to maximize the effects of both sides and minimize the downsides of each. For example, in a crisis, effective leaders can BOTH take charge AND build consensus. They can be direct and candid AND diplomatic and tactful.”

Summary

It IS possible to recover and go on to thrive in the aftermath of trauma, assert the authors.

But it is a *process*, and the process starts long before the disruptive event occurs.

“Don’t be caught unprepared,” advises Dr. Goulston. “When trauma shows up at your front door, the sooner you take action, the sooner you can make things right—and the sooner your employees can be on the road to healing.” ■

Editor’s note: *Effective communication is also vital. See the Handout section on page 4.*

Dr. Diana Hendel is the co-author of Trauma to Triumph: A Roadmap for Leading Through Disruption and Thriving on the Other Side (HarperCollins Leadership, Spring 2021) and Why Cope When You Can Heal? How Healthcare Heroes of COVID-19 Can Recover from PTSD (Harper Horizon, December 2020). She is an executive coach and leadership consultant, former hospital CEO, and the author of Responsible: A Memoir, a riveting and deeply personal account of leading during and through the aftermath of a deadly workplace trauma.

As the CEO of Long Beach Memorial Medical Center and Miller Children’s and Women’s Hospital, Hendel led one of the largest acute care, trauma, and teaching hospital complexes on the West Coast.

Dr. Mark Goulston is the co-author of Trauma to Triumph: A Roadmap for Leading Through Disruption and Thriving on the Other Side (HarperCollins Leadership, Spring 2021) and Why Cope When You Can Heal? How Healthcare Heroes of COVID-19 Can Recover from PTSD (Harper Horizon, December 2020). He is a board-certified psychiatrist, fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, former assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA-NPI, and a former FBI and police hostage negotiation trainer. He is the creator of Theory Y Executive Coaching that he provides to CEOs, presidents, founders, and entrepreneurs, and is a TEDx and international keynote speaker.

Mark hosts the My Wakeup Call podcast, where he speaks with influencers about their purpose in life and the wakeup calls that led them there and is the co-creator and moderator of the multi-honored documentary Stay Alive: An Intimate Conversation about Suicide Prevention.

Communication is A VITAL Step

In times of crisis, employees need frequent, real-time, transparent communication more than ever. The acronym **VITAL** will help employees and employers remember the tenets around communicating in the aftermath of trauma:

Visible. Leaders must be highly visible and take the lead in communication. Do not hide behind a spokesperson. Communicate quickly and clearly to reduce ambiguity.

In it Together.” Double down on messages connected to teambuilding, camaraderie, purpose. Acknowledge fears and worries as normal. Let people know what to expect.

Transparent. Align leadership in how they see the external environment and make sure everyone agrees on what “success” looks like so messages are cascaded consistently. Do not create voids by waiting to communicate. Tackle rumors head on. Share bad news the minute you have it.

Accessible. Use all modalities (video, email, intranet, text, town halls, etc.) to convey messages from the senior leader. Have a central repository/FAQ where people can get info and ask questions between regular communication sessions.

Listening. Ask questions and leave room for inquiry. When listening, stop talking. Resist the temptation to just listen for what you want to hear (your job is to hear and deal with the hard stuff too).

Communication is Never UN-important

While communication is even more important in a time of crises, do not overlook that effective communication and engagement between employee and employer has never been more crucial than in today’s hybrid and remote work

environment in which workers and supervisors are often working off site.

Without physical proximity managers need to use **NEW** avenues for relationship-building with remote workers. The following are tips for hybrid or remote work:

- ❖ Managers should use instant messaging for the types of interactions that occur in the hallways with office-based staff. Ask how their day is going, send a link to a helpful article or share a joke.

- ❖ Share calendars! Doing so allows remote staff to see when they have the best chance of catching the manager between meetings. Remote staff can save non-urgent questions for regular meetings rather than sending multiple emails or instant messages.

Even when workers *are* on-site:

Considering COVID, employers must increase visibility: Returning to work, whether now or later, requires that leaders be front and center where people can see them so they can understand what has changed, what is changing, and the direction the organization is taking.

Employers must clarify policies and procedures: Over the past year, it is likely that organizational guidelines changed due to COVID. It is important for employers to create an outlet for employees to ask questions, without fear of reprimand, to ensure that workers understand what is expected of them. ■

Sources: *Employee Assistance Report*, Drs. Diana Hendel and Mark Goulston.