



# Crisis Response for Business: More than an Intervention

**By Tonya Slawinski, Ph.D.** **T**he phone rings, you pick up, and you are being asked to provide crisis response services for a company downsizing, for an injury in the workplace, or for the untimely death of an employee. You accept this assignment because you have years of experience providing crisis intervention for individuals and families in mental health or private-practice settings. You have even taken several of the most popular crisis response trainings.

You feel prepared, but are you? A successful crisis response for business is more complex than just providing the intervention.

Let's examine crisis response services from a business perspective by answering some basic questions.

## 1. Why are these services important in a business setting?

The first thing you need to know is that crisis response has become a *very* popular service for businesses to offer to their employees. It shows employees that their company cares about them when they face traumatic events that fall outside the norm for that environment.

The anniversary of 9/11 highlighted the failings of some companies to provide any kind of support for their employees, and the resulting discontent. It is important to recognize, however, that industry regulations and standards also drive the development of crisis services.

## 2. Who should provide these services from the business perspective?

Businesses may contract for crisis services in several ways. Many companies receive crisis response services through their employee assistance program (EAP). Although some EAPs provide these services directly, others subcontract out crisis response services to nationwide crisis response groups, local crisis responders, individual responders living in the affected area, or all of these providers.

Businesses also may choose to contract directly for their crisis response services. This can be done through a variety of internal departments, such as HR, security or

even the executive offices. Regardless of how the crisis responder is contracted, the goal is to provide an intervention appropriate for the specific business setting.

## 3. Where are the services to be provided?

In many cases the type of crisis may determine where the response is to be provided. If the business has suffered physical damage, an alternate site may be chosen. If not, it is not unusual to provide the response services on location. It is also not unusual for "business as usual" practices to continue during the intervention process. Time is money in business, and shutting down may not be an option.

## 4. When should these services be offered?

This varies greatly within the business community. There are some corporate industry standards that demand crisis response services to be provided within two hours of the actual event. There is also a new trend for some groups to want services even more quickly. Generally, however, EAPs work closely with their corporate clients to determine the appropriate time and then schedule those services with their crisis professionals. Businesses that work directly with crisis response professionals or groups typically follow a similar process.

## 5. How should these services be provided?

*Companies expect the crisis professional to be the face of the company to the employee.* Despite the fact that professionals are outsiders, there is an expectation that you should successfully integrate into the culture of the organization. Proper dress, proper usage of company terminology, and understanding of the company culture and politics are a must for a successful intervention.

Now that we have laid the groundwork for business expectations, let's examine what we bring to the corporate environment, and the new skill sets we need to develop for business interventions. Let's begin with the skills, education and training that we bring to the intervention.

As mental health professionals we have assisted

clients through a wide variety of crises. We rarely find ourselves surprised by anything a client brings to us. Our ability to manage intense, stressful situations is what draws us to the crisis response field. We are able to provide services in a variety of settings because mental health professionals nowadays are expected to be mobile.

As for our credentials, we have graduate degrees in mental-health related fields, are licensed or certified as independent practitioners, have practiced for at least five years, and are experienced in providing crisis intervention. Many of us carry additional credentials that we have earned over the years.

We have been trained in crisis response services through one of the currently recognized and popular critical incident response training programs. Although there is some controversy around which approach may be most sound (see April 2004 issue), most programs are evolving to include new research and skills from which to choose.

What else could we possibly need to know in order to provide an intervention? Let's consider some of the common dilemmas that arise for crisis professionals in a business setting.

### 1. Am I a therapist or a consultant?

After many years of providing mental health services, it can be hard to redefine ourselves. We can't ignore our mental health background, but we are using it in a consulting rather than a therapeutic framework. Just like if you were called in to provide a second opinion for a colleague, you would assess, make recommendations and either refer back to that colleague or assist in referring for other services. As a "consultant" you rarely, if ever, retain that client as your own.

When providing crisis response services, you are the "consulting crisis expert." You will provide your expertise through information gathering and giving, assessing for referral, and making recommendations, but you will not develop an ongoing relationship with the individual, group or corporate client. You are a consultant, not a therapist.

### 2. Fitting into the corporate environment . . . it's more than just an intervention.

Many otherwise good interventions have resulted in bad feedback about the crisis professional. Companies may say that the employees liked the group intervention, but that the professional was "too mental-healthy," didn't dress properly, didn't use appropriate company terminology, wasn't prompt, or didn't follow protocols that were

laid out for the intervention — just to name a few. So despite the good intervention, the overall service was not well-received.

A good crisis response service requires that all aspects of the service provided be attended to, not just the intervention. We need to ask questions that will help us to be properly prepared to provide our services in a business setting.

### 3. Continuing-education requirements.

As professionals, we strive to stay current with new techniques and training in our practice. Crisis response training has recently begun to evolve beyond models that were initially developed in the late 1980s. New trainings have begun to focus on evidence-based practices, cognitive-behavioral techniques and services that are individualized to meet the needs of a variety of clients.

One of the biggest challenges we face as crisis responders is the lack of predictability about when or how often we will be used. It becomes difficult for many of us to justify sometimes costly, ongoing training if our services are used only occasionally. However, if we don't stay current, our skills become stagnant and we become unsure in our delivery of the intervention.

As professionals we should consider supervision or coaching as an option for support during interventions. These options also could be considered when providing an intervention in settings that are new or more challenging. Sometimes it's more rewarding to work one-on-one to hone our individual skills than to join large classroom-style trainings that may or may not be designed to meet the individual's training needs.

Crisis response work is extremely rewarding. There is an increasing awareness, however, that a good crisis response comprises many components — only one of which is the actual intervention. As crisis response professionals, we owe it to those we serve to understand not only their reactions to a crisis event, but also the environment in which our services will be rendered. Only then will our response be successful. ☺

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