

Supportive Connections

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Making *CHAOS* out of order: When your crisis plan goes “south”

The one thing that can be guaranteed about a crisis is that something unexpected will happen. That's the nature of crises. But you don't necessarily expect your crisis plan (and team) to be the thing to go wrong. When the integrity of your plan is compromised there is the distinct possibility that the initial crisis will take a back seat to the crisis within the team organized to respond. So rather than making order out of chaos, the reverse becomes true. We don't necessarily like to talk about when things go wrong with our plans and our teams aren't working together. However, the learning to be gained by our mistakes is invaluable.

There are so many things that can go wrong, it is actually surprising sometimes to consider plans that work. However, I would like to focus on one aspect which I believe to be at the basis of any solid plan. That is communication. Simply talking can pull a situation spiraling out of control, back on track. Let's consider three situations in which faulty or inadequate communication contributed to a plan “going south”.

- 1) XYZ crisis team had been together for several years. The team had functioned well together on numerous incidents, responding flexibly to what would be considered out of the ordinary situations in a workplace environment where the risk was generally considered low. Three months ago a new CEO had taken over the company. He was introduced to the crisis team and familiarized with the current plan and the response procedures. A simulation was scheduled and the CEO was to participate in the exercise, however the day before the simulation was to take place, the CEO “begged out” of the exercise in order to take care of some other pressing company business. Before a second simulation could be scheduled to include him, a crisis occurred in the workplace. The CEO was once again out of the office, so the team organized as usual. The team organized their response to the crisis and initiated next steps to be taken. According to the crisis plan, employees were to be instructed to go to a safe location and then further information would be provided by their managers regarding the work schedule for the upcoming week. Just as employees were gathering their things to leave the site, an employee came in and announced that the CEO was on television instructing everyone to go home and take the next week off. The CEO made additional promises to the employees about paid time off, despite not knowing the facts or the extent of the incident. Employees became confused by the mixed messages they received from the team and the CEO, resulting in angry comments about management, the crisis team and the company's lack of interest in their well-being, etc. In this particular case a second crisis for the employees was created by the lack of communication between the team and the CEO. A third crisis then developed between the CEO and the team.
- 2) Crisis plans can become vulnerable when departments merge or the responsibility for crisis management shifts from one department to another. Companies are constantly changing, merging and morphing into different organizational structures. Sometimes there is a clear, well planned transition and other times the change is Teams that have generally planned responses find additional players participating in the planning process and without prior knowledge or discussion regarding involvement. The reason for the shift is unclear and could be the result of trend within a professional group to contribute to the process. However, these unannounced changes can cause uncertainty, fragmentation in planning or parallel plans to be activated unknowingly. In this instance, the first step is to appropriately coordinate the current crisis and afterwards open lines of communication to discuss the change.
- 3) Sometimes being a part of the crisis team takes on additional meaning for an individual and the management of their part of the plan becomes personal. In these cases, whether intentional or not, the result is that the individual team member actually contributes to the crisis because they have not communicated successfully with other members. Very well established crisis teams have fallen apart because communications were compartmentalized or information was withheld from other team members as a means maintaining departmental control.

These are just a few examples of how “order can turn into chaos. Communication is the foundation for successful crisis management and when communication breaks down, even the best team can contribute to the problem.

Sandbox Solutions

Would your clients benefit from training in crisis management? Let Supportive Solutions be your training resource for the development of crisis management materials.

Schedule a time with Tonya Slawinski to discuss your client's training needs and how we can help!

Topic for Discussion

If it were the 80's and you were developing crisis response services, what would you do differently if you knew then what you know now?

Client message corner

Supportive Solutions continues to expand our consultant network. In just two years we have added grown to over 300 consultants. My goal has been to expand our Latino consultant presence in our consultant group. In June I will be speaking at the Latino Social work conference in Chicago and my goal is to develop a strong relationship with this growing group of social workers.

It is important to recognize not only the uniqueness of our individual reactions to a crisis, but also how culture defines our utilization of resources. If we identify barriers to services and resources, we will be able to plan more effectively for future crisis response.

Have a great summer!

Tonya Slawinski, President

Resource corner

- **BOOK:**

Interventions Following Mass Violence and Disasters: Strategies for Mental Health Practice (2006). (Eds.) Ritchie, Watson & Friedman. The Guilford Press.

- **RESEARCH:**

British Journal of Psychiatry (2002),181,158-162. Brief screening instrument for post-traumatic stress disorder. Chris R. Brewin, Suzanna Rose, Bernice Andrews, John Green, Philip Tata, Chris McEvedy, Stuart Turner and Edna B. Foa.

- **WEBSITE:**

<http://tfcbt.musc.edu>

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NEW Address: for correspondence

P.O. Box 52
Murrysville, PA 15668

Phone: 724.325.3367

Fax: 724.327.6897

E-mail: info@supportive-solutions.com

Supportive Solutions supports efforts to save our natural resources. We at SSI will continue to provide a quarterly newsletter, but will do so via email. If you would prefer to receive it in a hardcopy format, just email us and we will pop one in the mail for you.

If you would like to “unsubscribe” from our newsletter, please send us an email with “unsubscribe” in the subject line.

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Sometimes you need a lot.

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