



Support for Managers Incidents in the Workplace

There is always a chance in any workplace that out of the ordinary incidents can occur. Dissatisfied customers, staff ill-health and death, unacceptable behaviour from colleagues and customers, adverse media comment, accidents at work, sudden loss experienced by staff members whether at work or at home are amongst the occurrences that are being experienced on a regular basis by our customer base. The questions for the manager are twofold – “How can I deal with this?” and “How can Workplace Wellness help?”

How can I deal with this?

The key aspect of incident management is preparedness. A manager who understands the workplace and has analysed the potential hazards is in a much better position to deal with issues that arise. In fact, this is one of the important factors that identifies someone as a manager and should be part of every manager’s ongoing training and development.

Several of the incidents that occur on the premises are predictable, even if their occurrence on a particular day is a surprise. Taking customer behaviour as an example; the customer can often be agitated, distressed and needy. Given this fact, it is likely that there will sometimes be outbursts of aggression and anger from customers. Knowing this, a manager needs to identify the likelihood of this happening to his or her team and then put in place protocols that ensure an appropriate response. Some of these protocols will be governed by codes of practice of your organisation and others will be developed locally to augment these. In the first instance staff, need to be aware that such incidents are a possibility – it would be wrong to recruit staff without bringing to their attention the potential hazards in the workplace – and secondly they need to know how to respond. Good management will ensure that staff, are sufficiently resourced to deal with such events with confidence, and with suitable organisational support.

The manager, therefore, needs to look carefully at the workplace and create solutions for predictable problems. There should be clearly identified processes for dealing with such issues, and this should extend to anything that might be anticipated.

Taking this a step further, the manager should also be involved in proactive strategies to create an environment in which some incidents can be reduced or eliminated. Staff training has been shown to be very effective at reducing miscommunication that leads to violence for instance, and ensuring that customer-facing staff are suitably trained to identify and respond to the early signs that might lead to an outburst is an important task for managers. Experience in the NHS, for instance, has shown that a suitable

environment coupled with sensitive communication skills can greatly reduce verbal and physical aggression and a manager should consider this, especially in a 'front-line' environment.

Having established sound processes for anticipating, preventing and dealing with incidents it is still inevitable that there will be events in the workplace that lead to discomfort and disturbance amongst staff. The manager at these times is pivotal in containing and defusing the reaction of staff because it has been shown that the way the manager behaves has a definite impact on the outcome.

Handling an Incident

Step 1

- Find out exactly what has happened:
- What happened, where and when?
- Who is involved?
- Does anybody require immediate attention?
- Is there still a physical hazard?

Step 2

Contact the appropriate people in your business:

- HR
- Line Manager
- Health & Safety Manager
- Trades Unions
- Premises/Facilities Manager

Step 3

Talk to the staff involved:

- See overleaf for more details of how to do this

Step 4

Determine the next steps and take action:

- Do you need to do anything
- Do you need to direct someone else to do anything

Step 5

Monitor the effectiveness and appropriateness of your actions:

- Are things happening the way they are supposed to?
- Is anything else needed?
- Are your efforts still needed?

Step 6

Consider the need for Workplace Wellness support:

- We will support managers immediately over the phone, and are able to provide on-site support when appropriate – normally after 72 hours: phone for details.

Supporting your Staff: the 4 Vs

Visit

It is important that managers visit the site of an incident, and visit those members of staff who are involved. If someone has gone home or elsewhere, make every attempt to visit them as well.

Validate

People will have a variety of feelings about what has happened. Some may be very upset, others may be angry. Some may be very quiet whilst others will be very active and vocal. One of the important things for a manager to remember is that people will respond in the way that is best for them, and they need to have their feelings validated – in other words, it is important not to make someone feel that they should not be responding in the way that they are, and to accept that all the different ways of responding emotionally to an incident are valid.

Volunteer

Ask what you or the organisation can do to help. Depending on the nature of the event, there will be a variety of things you can do; perhaps someone needs to be taken off front-line duties for a time, or maybe some staff need help getting home. Maybe someone would like you to make a telephone call to a partner or a school to make arrangements for the remainder of the day. In other cases it may be that staff need to be reminded that their EAP is available for them, available 24/7 year-round.

Sometimes, volunteering means that you will promise the staff to sit down with them to learn the lessons from the incident and bring these to the attention of senior managers.

The basic question from a manager to a staff member or group is: “What do you need from me? Is this something I can deliver? If so, how will I do it? If not, who is best placed to meet the need, and how can I signpost?”

Visit Again

Staffs who have been involved in incidents tell us time and again that it is important for managers to visit again, even after the incident seems to be over. This sends a clear message that you take the events seriously and that you have their wellbeing at heart.

It is important to ensure that all such incidents and near-misses are recorded in writing, to provide an audit of the incident and also to help determine suitable responses in the future. Although such records are often called ‘Critical Incident’ reports, this relates to a Health & Safety definition rather than a psychological definition. One of the key messages is that not all incidents are critical incidents, even though they are unpleasant and leave staff distressed and may be recorded in a ‘Critical Incident’ log.

How can Workplace Wellness help?

Workplace Wellness delivers the Employee Assistance service through a number of different avenues, the three key elements are:

- Helplines
- Management Consultants
- Counsellors

Our Helplines are available 24/7, and will handle queries in a sympathetic and supportive manner. Over 50% of all requests for support are dealt with exclusively at this level and the support offered is sufficient to enable the caller to resolve the problem. The helpline will also take contact details and background information in support of a request for further help, when the intervention of one of our Counsellors or Consultants would be more appropriate.

Our Management Consultants will provide professional support, information and advice to managers. Where a manager is not sure how best to proceed, our consultants are able to offer an objective view and suggest alternatives. For instance, in dealing with incidents in the workplace, they may be able to highlight the key ingredients of the manager's response and suggest next steps. It will always be the manager's responsibility to manage, and our consultants act as a supportive tool rather than as a replacement for this, but our aim is to help the manager identify effective solutions.

Where an individual needs specific help to understand and manage the emotional response to a situation, we often suggest that they see one of our Counsellors. The role of the counsellor includes providing confidential counselling therapy, liaising with managers when there is a clear need and consent to do so, cross-referring to Occupational Health and a number of other key tasks. Confidentiality is the keyword in this service and sometimes managers can be frustrated that they are not kept informed of the progress of the employee – simply put, without specific written consent from the employee we would always be unable to discuss anything about counselling and would not even be able to confirm whether someone had accessed the service.

We also provide a **Critical Incident** service. This component of the EAP is managed slightly differently to some other elements. The first step we take is to talk to the referring manager and discuss the incident, coming to a decision about how best to help. Very often, what a manager might see as a critical incident is in fact an unpleasant event but it does not meet our definition of a Critical Incident; often, these events are unpleasant workplace situations that require sensitive handling outside of the described framework.

One of the challenges is to codify this response, because of the subjective elements present in each situation. Death in Service is a very good example of this – normally, we wouldn't see this as a 'Critical Incident' even though it is a situation in which support is needed – we would offer appropriate advice, information and support but it would rarely be in the form of a 'Critical Incident' intervention although in exceptional circumstances there may be such a psychological impact that a full-blown 'Critical Incident' may be declared. Likewise with verbal abuse in an office – unpleasant and shocking as this may be, it rarely becomes a 'Critical Incident'.

Incidents in the Workplace

There are things that happen in the workplace that cause distress and alarm, but often it is within the manager's skill set to deal with these, particularly when supported by internal resources and sometimes by Workplace Wellness. Where staff are unsettled it is rarely the case that group sessions with a Critical Incident Counsellor are appropriate, although such staff should always be advised that the Workplace Wellness EAP service is available for them 24/7.

Where a Critical Incident response is appropriate, we will liaise closely with local managers to ensure that the delivery meets the need of participants. The nature of our support will vary from incident to incident, but will typically involve at least two hours of group time to facilitate dialogue between participants, and will often allow some time for individual drop-in support on the same day. We would normally expect this to be delivered on a ratio no higher than 1:10 facilitator to participants so that if a larger team was involved we would either provide two or more facilitators. Following this, we will provide a written report to the manager who commissioned the work, outlining the issues and highlighting any remaining risks. As with all our work, this is done under a code of confidentiality which will ensure we respect the privacy of individuals whilst helping your organisation to meet its responsibilities as an employer.

Onsite critical incident support is charged as an additional cost but will be discussed at the time of the incident/event and best course of action within your organisational budgets.