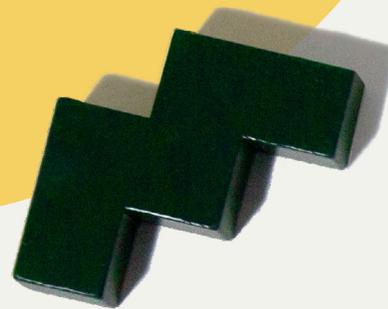




What Leaders Should Do After A Tragic Event

5 Ways to Support Employees After A Tragic Event

Remember that old trope; “it’s not personal, it’s business?” Fifteen years ago, that may have felt true, but now we know better. Business is personal. It is a human-centered enterprise, created by and for individuals, which means business leaders must address not only the professional context of their employees’ lives but also what employees are experiencing at a personal level. In today’s social climate, leaders are expected to speak out about major news events, even when speaking up feels scary. When tragedy occurs, and you aren’t sure what to do, follow these tips.



1 Create a safe space for your team

ACKNOWLEDGE WHAT HAPPENED.

Address the event quickly, as objectively as you can. Ideally, you should aim to speak up within the first 24 hours. What you say doesn't need to be polished or perfect yet, but do take the time to acknowledge what has happened and the many strong emotions individuals may be feeling. Even if you don't fully understand how others are affected, it's important to recognize their valid reactions. Remember: you don't need to dwell on the moment. Just acknowledge it authentically, give space for sharing, and move forward.

BE FLEXIBLE AS PEOPLE PROCESS THESE EVENTS.

Understand that your employees may be distracted and experiencing a number of emotions. A few things you can do to support them are to minimize any non-critical events and meetings over the next few days, and adjust your deadlines or deliverables, giving everyone space to work independently and at an adjusted pace. If remote work is an option, encourage employees to work where they feel most comfortable and productive.

PRACTICE GOOD LISTENING. LISTEN TO YOUR EMPLOYEES, AND LISTEN TO WHAT YOU ARE LEARNING IN THE NEWS.

Whether your team is in the office or working remotely, check in on them, and offer to listen. Send a note or give each person a quick call to ask what they need that day to be productive. Some employees may want to share their thoughts with you. It is not your role to solve the problem for them. Simply listen to understand, show your support, and share resources to help the employee cope with how they are feeling.

REINFORCE SUPPORT RESOURCES AT WORK, INCLUDING EAP PROGRAMS.

While you obviously want to be a good listener and ally, you cannot be responsible for other people's mental health and wellness. Remind all employees about mental health benefits and resources where they can seek support. Some organizations choose to create a central, one-page document listing relevant support resources, so that information can be easily shared after a tragic news event.

LEAN ON YOUR ERG LEADERS FOR IDEAS ABOUT HOW TO BEST SUPPORT EMPLOYEES.

Consider working with your DEI leaders and Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) to provide one-on-one support or virtual team sessions in small groups where people can feel safe connecting with each other.

2 Set healthy boundaries

MAKE SURE CONVERSATIONS ARE CIVIL AND DON'T INTERFERE WITH WORK.

Conversations about the event may arise naturally and should be welcomed. But, you'll also want to stay attuned to conversations that are not conducted respectfully or may be taking too much time away from work. If you feel things are getting off track, you might say, "I know we all have emotions around these events, but let's table the conversation and focus on our goals for today." If statements are made that may create environments where employees feel unsafe or marginalized, it's important to plainly and resolutely address them. Remind everyone of the consequences of disrespectful behavior, and follow through with consistent counseling and disciplinary actions as necessary.

ADDRESS ANY LINGERING PERFORMANCE ISSUES AS NECESSARY.

Most employees will be back to their usual selves after a few days, but if negative feelings persist and affect someone's productivity, those lingering feelings and issues need to be addressed. If the individual is having trouble processing the event, remind them of your company's EAP benefits and encourage them to seek professional counseling. Discuss what forms of support they may need to get back to business.

3

Help your team understand what they can do next

SHARE SPECIFIC IDEAS FOR ACTION.

Tragic news can make people feel powerless and discouraged. You can help people manage those emotions by providing a short list of actions they can take to make a difference. Sometimes, the best way to move through strong feelings is by putting our hands and hearts to work. Use [VolunteerMatch](#), [Activate Good](#) or [Catchafire](#) to find opportunities for active volunteerism.

HOST A DEPARTMENT-WIDE OR COMPANY-WIDE EVENT.

Depending on your team and the nature of what happened, you might consider a candle-lighting ceremony, an informal gathering for story sharing, or a chance to volunteer as a group with local nonprofits and charitable organizations. Remember to relate your leadership actions to the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts already underway in your organization.

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Engage in respectful and positive conversations

In times of stress, employees carefully watch the words and actions of their leaders. Don't underestimate the power of your example. This moment presents an opportunity to build trust, increase feelings of belonging, and practice your inclusive leadership skills.

In the wake of tragic or divisive events, you may be unsure how to navigate the inevitable conversations you'll be asked to have with your employees, colleagues, and personal circles.

When we feel deeply about an event or issue, we can often fail to find the best words for what we are feeling and believe. Tempers flare, emotions run high, and many otherwise respectful conversations can dissolve into hard feelings and a loss of respect. In these situations, it helps to have a [framework to have positive discussions](#).

Joseph Grenny, co-author of the book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, offers the following tips for how to share personal opinions at work. If you're unsure how to engage in these sorts of emotionally charged, uncomfortable conversations, here are a few tips for engaging respectfully.

- 1. Frame your conversation as a chance to learn from each other, not to change each other's minds.** Simply being curious about another's position is sufficient motivation to engage. That may sound like: "I know what I think about this issue, but I'm curious about why you feel so differently. Would you be open to sharing your position with me?"
- 2. Explain that you aren't trying to change the person's mind or attack their position. Then ask for permission to talk about the sensitive topic.** Here's some examples: "I'm not wanting a debate, and I'm not trying to change your mind. I just want to understand. I see this issue very differently. Would it be OK if I explained my perspective?"
- 3. Show respect.** Others will not engage with you if they don't feel respected by you. Over-communicate your respect for the other person and their opinion: "I value you and your perspective. I want to hear from you. I don't assume I'm right." "What have you experienced or learned that led you to feel that way?"
- 4. Look for areas of agreement rather than disagreement.** If the conversation takes a more dramatic turn, look for the greater principle governing both opinions. Say things like: "I want to find the goals we share and then look at the issue with those goals in mind." "Sounds like, for you, this ties to a lot of things that are also very important to me."
- 5. Most importantly, don't forget the "pause button."** It's important when you're having emotion-forward conversations to take a moment to breathe before responding to the person you're speaking with. In conversations where there can be differing views, taking a breath will help you be more mindful when you speak. And it's also okay to determine that you'd prefer not to continue the conversation at that time, or ever.

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Remember to care for yourself as well

Whether you are called on to address a mass shooting, overseas conflict, or natural disaster, tragic news stories can be troubling to many people and may affect their ability to perform at work. When a significant event occurs, it's important to acknowledge it and create an open, honest line of communication with employees.

Heartbreaking events often bring to the surface a wave of memories of personal experiences – fueled by hatred, bias, or just carelessness – that didn't necessarily make the headlines but made us feel undervalued, unseen, worthless, or vulnerable. Remember, don't assume you know who will be affected most. You don't know where the intersection may exist with other people's identities. In short, we're each working through our own strong feelings, and at work, we're trying to demonstrate poise.

Here's what that means for you as a leader:

It helps to cultivate mindful habits, even before bad news arrives or tragic events happen. There are many [self-care strategies](#). For instance, consider these three actions, adapted from Cole Arthur Riley of Black Liturgies.

- ➔ **KEEP A MANTRA.** Start by reminding yourself that your feelings are real, that your emotional reactions are justified. You may consider repeating these phrases as a sort of personal mantra for the moment: "My feelings are real and justified. These occurrences do not diminish my value. I deserve to be safe."
- ➔ **COPE PROACTIVELY.** Coping is often considered a reactive process, but we can prepare ourselves for potentially derailing events by considering, ahead of time, which healthy coping practices will help us manage our emotions. Perhaps that means cooking, cleaning, drawing, exercising, breathwork, listening to music, praying, playing, writing, reading, gardening, walking, or talking with a friend. Find what works best for you in this moment, and know that it may not be what has worked for you in the past.
- ➔ **TAKE CUES FOR REST.** Following every tragic story, the news media is flooded with reaction, rehashing, opinions, updates, etc. Be deliberate about turning off the TV and radio and unplugging from social media. Finding yourself in a constant cycle of these events can be stressful and even traumatic.

Navigating tragic news at work is never easy, but knowing the key steps to follow to frame those conversations with dignity and respect will help you become a better communicator, listener, leader, and ally.

About The Diversity Movement

The Diversity Movement offers a suite of employee experience applications that personalizes diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) for your organization and delivers real world business outcomes. Our team of experts provides a customized mix of online learning, tools, events, and consulting services that help our partners create future-focused, employee-centered cultures. Learn more at thediversitymovement.com.

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