

What crisis? How planning can alleviate the pain of workplace traumas

This article was first published in the *Australasian Law Management Journal*

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Dealing with traumatic events affecting law firms and their employees requires planning – before and after such incidents, writes Rachel Clements.

At recent HR Minds¹ events in Melbourne and Sydney, panellists from several major Australian law firms shared their honest and reflective accounts of managing a traumatic workplace event. While the nature of the incidents varied dramatically, the panellists' experiences provided the audience with practical insights and valuable guidance on managing the human elements of a crisis. This article discusses these insights and delivers information on best practice and evidence-based trauma-management approaches.

DEFINING TRAUMA

What is a traumatic event? Phoenix Australia, formerly the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health, defines it as "any event that involves experiencing or witnessing actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence". Panellists described an array of events fitting this definition, including a murder occurring outside a firm, a suicide at work, management of the Lindt Café siege in Sydney for staff who had connections with the hostages, and the long-term illness of a senior employee and its impact on the firm and its staff. Although these events involved diverse situations, similar lessons emerged from the panellists.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Perhaps the over-arching message to emerge from the events is the importance of having a trauma-management policy and procedures in place before an incident occurs. Many panellists echoed the sentiment that their firms did not know, from an



organisational perspective, how to respond to a workplace trauma.

However, a number of representatives commented that their firms adopted an educated and intuitive response to managing the trauma, which generally consisted of the following measures:

- establishing a trauma team whereby selected senior employees met and were given specific aspects of the trauma response to manage, including communicating the nature of the event to the firm (how, what and when); liaising with relevant family members, site management, security, emergency services, media and insurers; and arranging for on-site psychological support;
- taking the time for the trauma team (while in the midst of managing a crisis that required an immediate response) to meet and develop a plan of action; decide on key messages to be communicated to staff; determine the best method of delivery of the news, and prioritise key groups within the firm to whom to communicate;
- delivering the news face-to-face with staff and stakeholders if possible by 'walking the floor', meeting with specific teams and prioritising the release of details to ensure that those who had suffered the greatest impact from the event were the first to be informed. The importance of consistent messaging was discussed, with firms having to communicate a firm-wide message involving interstate locations to ensure the same message was delivered to all staff;
- providing regular, honest and timely communication updates to staff about the situation, even if there seemingly was not much news to communicate. Such regular communication was viewed as being vital to help manage anxiety reactions and minimise rumours (which can spread in the absence of regular communication);
- partnering with a psychological service provider that is adept at managing psychological trauma. While it was acknowledged that having a psychological service provider on-site was important, the timing of this required some

consideration. For example, often when people are first informed of a workplace trauma, they are in shock and disbelief and are not yet ready for counselling, whereas they may be more open to this assistance in the days following the news as reality starts to sink in;

- communicating to and supporting those who may not be currently working within the firm, such as those on maternity, sick or annual leave or secondment;
- connecting with those employees not coming in to work in the days following the incident. In some cases, they may be too distressed to work and require more immediate counselling support.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA

Best-practice initial response to trauma involves a process called psychological first aid, or PFA. This seeks to "reduce distress and attend to basic needs following a potentially traumatic event by providing simple interventions such as comfort, information, support and practical assistance".

The primary goal is to "enhance an individual's natural resilience and coping ability in the face of trauma".² From an organisational perspective, PFA aims to address the following issues in response to a trauma:

- presenteeism and absenteeism
- reduced productivity over time
- turnover
- morale

- team functioning.

Following a traumatic event, it is important to initiate the following guidelines in order to mitigate any potential risk of increased distress for your employees:

1. Make contact and engage people in group support, with the aim of responding to those involved in the event in a non-intrusive, helpful, and compassionate manner.
2. Gather information regarding the needs and concerns of people so that tailored PFA interventions can be provided.
3. Provide psycho-education about the nature of traumatic responses, normal reactions and what to expect in the immediate hours and days following trauma, as well as highlighting effective strategies to manage reactions.
4. Offer practical assistance, such as expectations regarding workload, alternate seating, or working arrangements.
5. Establish connections with social supports, such as the opportunity to engage in one-on-one debriefing assistance.

Other best-practice actions include:

- ensuring the leadership team 'triages' those in need to ensure they support those closest to the trauma; those presenting with high levels of emotional distress; those who are known to have pre-existing vulnerabilities; and those with limited social support;

- making HR leaders available to talk to people and 'walk the floor' in the days following an event;
- staggering psychological first-aid sessions over the ensuing days for people to attend so they can learn about reactions to trauma and how to best manage them;
- providing a trauma fact sheet to ensure that people have reference material to review when they are ready to do so;
- providing on-site one-on-one debriefing support for those in need; and
- delivering individual follow-up support for those in need for up to six weeks after the trauma to ensure that symptoms of distress are reducing over time.

By adhering to the principles of PFA, the workplace should be able to support the needs of their employees through a difficult time, while also mitigating any potential risks that may arise in the future as a consequence of the trauma.

NOTES

1. HR Minds is a group of HR professionals who, through their network, assist with the support and ongoing professional development for HR professionals in the legal sector.
2. Ref: Phoenix Australia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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