

Build a Workforce That Can Grow Through Adversity and Crisis

“We have an active shooter!” Do you expect to hear that at your place of work? Maybe not, but it certainly could happen. How about this one: “I just heard that our warehouse is on fire!” Or “It looks like a cat 5 hurricane is headed our way.” Or even the more likely “Sarah and her husband were killed in a car accident this weekend.”

Every single person experiences adversity in their life and most organizations must deal with some sort of crisis. Despite this fact, few businesses invest energy to help both their teams and individuals respond in a healthy way to crises.

The term “resilience” is getting a lot of buzz these days, and I think that the intent is positive. Many define resiliency as the ability to “bounce back.” Think of a rubber ball. It will be far more resilient than, for example, an egg, after a significant impact. The ball will return to its normal shape and the egg will not. The challenge is that we will experience a problem if we try to apply that term to people in adversity. When one deals with a real crisis, there is little chance of return to exactly the way things used to be. It sounds good to say that we should “bounce back,” but it’s nearly impossible to achieve.

I prefer a definition of human resilience like the one offered by Worldmaker International: “the capacity to prepare for, adapt to and grow through adversity.” Though a return to the old shape may be impossible, growth through that experience is not. What can you as a leader do to help your team grow through adversity? My recommendations address a leader’s actions before, during, and after a crisis.

Before a crisis. Leaders should focus on building a culture that recognizes the inevitability of adversity and welcomes the opportunity to learn and grow when it comes. I believe that there are three basic steps to do so:

1. Enhance self awareness. Employees need to understand what their strengths and weaknesses are, as well as their preferred styles, in order to learn and grow. All sound developmental programs are built on a foundation of self-awareness. As a leader, you can ensure that developmental counseling or regular feedback sessions include a requirement for personal analysis and introspection. There are numerous easily-accessible tools to help people understand what their personalities and preferences are like, including MBTI, Clifton Strengths, and my personal favorite, the enneagram. The self-aware employee is more ready to embrace growth and learning than one who is not.

2. Open lines of communication. Employees will need to communicate with others to grow through adversity. The leader’s role is to ensure that options for open communication are available before the crisis arrives. How do you do it? As with most

leader behaviors, what you do counts for a lot more than what you say. Consider these actions:

- Host regular “town halls” with employees and ensure that each includes solicitation of ideas and listening.
- Spend time with your employees in their space. No agenda necessary. Just visit and listen.
- Consider a series of focus groups with employees from different parts of the organization.
- Install a suggestion box and list/respond to those suggestions in a public forum.

3. Focus on preparedness. Regularly discuss preparedness in public events.

Encourage employees to safeguard critical documents in a fireproof container. Host active shooter and fire drills. Install first aid kits and AEDs. Teach CPR, basic first aid, and human resilience skills. Consider offering emergency kits for employees to carry with them on the road. You are limited by your imagination (and maybe resources) in this area, but literally anything you can do to create a culture of preparedness will be helpful.

During a crisis. The most important suggestion I can make for leaders during a crisis is to remain clam. Your steadfast leadership can give others the confidence to act instead of be paralyzed. Conversely, the leader who shouts or runs away will destroy that confidence. I remember once being in a tough firefight in combat and the leader on the other end of the radio was calm and supported me. I gained confidence and acted rationally because of that leader’s presence, even though it was through the radio. That was a great case of leadership by example and I always tried to emulate it.

After a crisis. When something really bad happens, we rarely know what to say to bring comfort to others. Unfortunately, this sometimes leads to avoidance. Because we don’t know what to say, we avoid the person in crisis. That is exactly the wrong approach. Try this instead: “I don’t know what to say that can possibly bring you any comfort, but I am here for you.” I learned that one in combat too. I once had a small unit end up with three of their fellow Soldiers dead after an incident. I immediately got to them as soon as I could. People in pain need help. As a leader, you need to be there for them. There may be nothing you can say, but you can *do* a great deal. Go to them. Get help from professionals, like a crisis response team or counseling organization. Most importantly, support your team through the adversity and well after the immediate pain has passed. This is the optimum time for reflection and growth, but it’s hard to achieve unless the foundation has been built by other leader actions along the way.

Will your team be crushed by the next crisis or grow through it? The answer to that question will be influenced by you. Give your teammates the leadership they need and help them grow.