

Seth Moeller:

Welcome. You're listening to The Difference@Work, a KGA podcast for managers and HR professionals eager to hear from experts and bring new perspectives to our work. In offering employee assistance and work-life programs, KGA hears from clients everyday about their increasingly complex work environments.

On our podcast you'll have a front row seat for conversations touching upon everything from crisis management and addiction to employee engagement and stress. I'm Seth Moeller, president of KGA. Today's episode of "The Difference At Work" is focused on responding to crises at work. My guest is Jeff Gorter.

Jeff is the Clinical Director of R3 Continuum. He is a longtime expert in providing onsite critical incident response for employers. He has responded directly to the September 11th terrorist attacks, Hurricane Katrina, the Virginia Tech shootings, Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, and the Newtown shooting tragedy.

Also, and in full disclosure, R3 Continuum is a trusted partner that we at KGA use to support our clients when tragedy strikes outside the Northeast.

Jeff, thank you so much for joining me.

Jeff Gorter:

Thank you, Seth.

Seth Moeller:

Great. Let's just jump in by defining some terms. Many organizations refer to having —I'm using air quotes here —"critical incidents" versus a crisis. What is this referring to and what's most common here?

Jeff Gorter:

Well, that's an interesting question because crisis or a critical incident is often defined by the venue or the organization or the industry in which it occurs. For example, in IT parlance, a critical incident is a system-wide failure or a data breach.

Seth Moeller:

Sure.

Jeff Gorter:

In fire service, a critical incident would be a four-alarm blaze with potential fatalities. In our context, what we're discussing, in a business setting, we've kind of been moving towards the term of "disruptive event" because we recognize there's a wide range of situations that occur that are not easily defined, not easily put in a box, but strike every organization, potentially. It could range from the unexpected death of an employee of a heart attack over the weekend to an active shooter scenario. Vastly different events.

Seth Moeller:

Where an entire region, if not the whole country, is caught up in it.

Jeff Gorter:

Or a natural disaster. Yet businesses are called upon to respond to the emotional disruption that occurs from that. Not just emotional but also

operational because I think this is where EAPs offer a critical service. It is an area that touches both the humanitarian and the business continuity needs of an organization. Recognizing that the employees are emotionally impacted by these events to one degree or another and it's part of corporate responsibility to offer a tangible, solid response.

Jeff Gorter: It's also true that the organization is duty-bound and fiscally smart to say, "How soon can we get operations going again? We need to be back in production. Every hour that we're offline is detrimental to the overall health of the organization."

Seth Moeller: Right. Right.

Jeff Gorter: Interestingly enough, that serves both purposes because so often whenever I've met with an employee following an event and I'll ask, "What do you most want right now?" Often they'll say, "I just want to get back to work. I just want to get back to that which seems predictable, familiar, where I know what I'm supposed to do."

Seth Moeller: Within that person's control perhaps.

Jeff Gorter: Yes. Yes. Restores a sense of control, which is in fact functional. It's what I call functional resilience. It's saying, "Listen, it's not that I'm trying to minimize or pretend that this didn't happen but part of how I get through this is controlling what I can control."

Seth Moeller: Really, moving to a broad concept of disruptive events but for the individual, functional resilience.

Jeff Gorter: Exactly.

Seth Moeller: Hands on, back to what they know how to do.

Jeff Gorter: Which serves both the individual and the organization. It's a win-win situation.

Seth Moeller: I think most of us believe ... Perhaps this is not true of you, given your line of work, but I think most of us believe tragedy or trauma will not really touch us, right? Just talk a little bit about the commonplace nature of workplace crises or disruptive events, to use the new term.

Jeff Gorter: Currently we respond about 1,500 times a month to events that impact a workplace. In over 20 years of providing response to these kinds of events, we've begun to see patterns.

The top three events consistently are unexpected employee death, for example of a heart attack over the weekend or a car accident on the way home from

work, kind of what you would call course of life events. Things that can occur anywhere at any time.

Seth Moeller: But not anticipated?

Jeff Gorter: But not anticipated. Exactly. Then robberies, either retail robbery or potentially at a person's home or in the parking lot, things of that nature. Then the third largest is reduction in force. Over the years any organization of a significant size often has to make that very difficult decision; and again, that is disruptive. It's not traumatic.

You know, of those three, of an unexpected employee death, a robbery, or a reduction in force, only one of them, robbery, even has the potential to be traumatic, to be likely to cause a PTSD type of reaction. The other two are ones that again I would say "course of life" or "course of business" type of events. The unifying factor is that all three of them are emotionally disruptive.

Seth Moeller: What's interesting, not on your list are the manmade, what I refer to as natural disasters, the shootings, or even what I now hear about as the ambient political environment, in terms of causing these kinds of things. I think as an EAP we hear about them quite a lot, but when it comes to the issue of an organization needing a response they haven't made your list.

Jeff Gorter: Exactly. Even though active shooter situations or a mass shooting situation are clearly the things that grip everybody's heart, they're the things that are going to make the headlines, and it is every employer's fear no doubt, it's also true that statistically they are the least likely type of event to happen.

Seth Moeller: That's very helpful. It is local, it is person to person, and it is the unanticipated within my workforce.

Jeff Gorter: Exactly.

Seth Moeller: Got it. Let's go within an organization a little bit and talk about what happens or what is often happening immediately following a crisis. How do you take this into consideration when you're organizing a response?

Jeff Gorter: Sure. When the unexpected happens, when it strikes, whether it is again a large-scale event of the kind that we know is going to be on TV or whether it is something that is intensely personal, maybe a note-passing robbery that involves only one teller, or the death of a beloved coworker from cancer or some other illness, in each of these situations it creates a level of disruption to the organization.

People are offline. They're wondering, they're talking, they're trying to make sense of this. What just happened? How do I incorporate this in there? There's

that shock of the unexpected that all of us have. It's human nature to pause, step back, and say, "How do I manage this? Where do I go with this?"

It often is accompanied by a clear sense of safety. Is it safe? If it happened to that person could it happen to me? That safety, interestingly enough ... Again, obviously in large-scale events or in an active shooter situation, safety is a first and primary concern. Also in a natural disaster.

Even in the unexpected death of an employee, perhaps again of a heart attack, it leaves all of us when we're face to face with mortality to ask the question, "Well, if it happened to so-and-so could it happen to me? My loved ones?"

Seth Moeller: That response is happening up and down the organizational chain, if you will, the CEO, the executive leaders, the manager, the team lead, right down to rank-and-file employees then?

Jeff Gorter: Exactly.

Seth Moeller: When you walk through the door and people are in that space of realizing perhaps their sense of security needs to be reevaluated, isn't as good as they thought, what does that mean you're first doing when you're coming onsite and responding? How is that a part of the way you bring your services forward?

Jeff Gorter: We train all of our consultants in our network to accomplish three things when they come out there. First off: stabilization. The calming reassuring presence of a trained professional who comes in and is able to ... Is not running away from the situation but is running towards the situation, bringing a sense of stability, of predictability again.

That right there is a visible expression, a tangible expression of corporate care, and an expression that, okay, somebody is here who has the background, the training, the skills to handle this.

After stabilization comes ventilation. Allowing people an opportunity to simply talk about what this means to them. What's going on? It is part of when confronted with a difficult or shocking or sad or tragic situation it is human nature to wrestle with the meaning. What does this mean? What does it mean to me? The process of meaning attribution is a natural phase that we all go through as we try and make sense of it.

Seth Moeller: Explain the term for me a little bit. I'm not following. "Meaning attribution." Here I am, my colleague passed away unexpectedly the day before, I'm upset. What does "meaning attribution" mean?

Jeff Gorter: Right. Typically, people go in either one of two directions. Sometimes both. They'll say, "What does this say about me as a person? How did I handle it? Am I weak or strong? Did I face it with bravery or do I feel ashamed of my reactions?"

Do I think that I responded with strength and resilience or do I think secretly is something wrong with me? Did I not rise to this occasion?"

Seth Moeller: You're saying immediately following people do spend time and visit this space of self-evaluation in the face of something that happened?

Jeff Gorter: "What does it say about me?" Or conversely, "what does it say about you? What does it say about my company? My community? My coworkers?"

Seth Moeller: "I'm proud to work here" or, conversely, "This stinking place doesn't care."

Jeff Gorter: Yeah. Exactly. "We took a hit, but we stood strong." "Boston Strong" is a great example.

Seth Moeller: Right.

Jeff Gorter: Where a community came together and people were able to tap into resilience as a whole. Again, when an event strikes unexpectedly, what does it say about me? What does this say about my company? My team? My country?

Seth Moeller: Got it. That's the second phase of what people are in.

Jeff Gorter: And ventilation. Ventilation allows people to articulate that, begin to talk about it, and come to that meaning. Then the final one is education. To simply share with them, "Here are some solid things you can do, some pragmatic strategies to help yourself, to help your coworkers, to help your family when you go home." Basic things of self-care that are not rocket science.

They're things like make sure you're eating enough and of the right kind of foods, make sure you're staying hydrated, reach out to those who are in your natural support system. Again, these are not complex or highly sophisticated but in the immediate aftermath, after a crisis, what you want is something that I can do right away that is simple, that begins to build momentum. "Right. Okay. I can drink something right now. I can go for a walk. I can call my brother."

Seth Moeller: It is that practical.

Jeff Gorter: It's that practical. That kind of education then helps them reengage with, "Ah, I did this, the right thing. Now I can do the next right step and the next one after that."

Seth Moeller: That makes a lot of sense in terms of how you are initially guiding whomever you're interfacing with, again, the CEO down to rank-and-file employees, and giving them that ability to take practical steps.

What are some mistakes you see within an organization when you're arriving? I'm assuming there are things that sometimes happen that perhaps are

counterproductive. I do mean to ask this question in the context of well-intended. Organizations trying to do the right thing but perhaps, if you will, getting out over their skis. What are the kinds of things that perhaps you have to help them either do differently, dial back, or redirect?

Jeff Gorter:

Probably the most common is a desire to rush past it. If we can rush past this then it's no longer scary, it's no longer upsetting, it's no longer distressing. Kind of the, "Move along, folks. Nothing to see here" sort of approach that says, "Let's just get back to work."

The Achilles heel in that, because I spoke earlier about, yes, returning to work does have a role in that functional resilience but doing so without acknowledging the event and the power of it, it puts the business leader in the untenable position of telling people "get back to work" without acknowledging the power of this event.

We often instruct leaders to follow a very simple mnemonic: ACT. We instruct them to ACT. A-C-T. A is simply acknowledge and name the event. Again, be right upfront and say, "Yes. This event happened. This was powerful. This was an awful day for ABC Company."

Then C is communicate both compassion and competence, care and strength. Be able to say, "We get that this was a powerful blow. All of us are grieving at the loss of John Smith but we're going to find a way to pull together as a team and we can get through this." Both a message of care and a message of strength. That's the C.

Then the T in ACT is transition to a future focus. Begin to lay out the plan. Here's what we're going to do this afternoon. Here's what we're going to do tomorrow. Here's what next week looks like. As a leader begins to lay out that plan, it again is reassuring. People take a deep breath. "Okay. Somebody is in charge."

Seth Moeller:

The ACT, the T transition, dovetails to my next question, which really is, okay, eventually your crisis response experts leave. What are a few things an organization ought to be doing in the next days and weeks? If you will, the relatively immediate following time frame?

Jeff Gorter:

Exactly. Often times providing what would be natural ways in which this group connected or supported each other previously? For example, some organizations have ... Potlucks are a simple example of that or a company picnic or employee of the month. Things that are sort of the typical things that we don't often recognize the power of those types of events until they're disrupted, until they're not there, until they're not present.

Often times providing space and opportunity for employees to ventilate, to talk about what just happened, and then providing the natural space for them to say, "Hey. We're going to have a fundraiser to support John Smith's children."

Seth Moeller: Have you seen any good examples of what an organization might do a year out?

Jeff Gorter: Depending on the size and nature of the event it's often appropriate to have an anniversary event. For example, in a large-scale shooting or a natural disaster something of that magnitude it makes sense. I wouldn't necessarily encourage somebody to say, "Here's the one year anniversary of the reduction in force."

Seth Moeller: Right.

Jeff Gorter: We don't want to go back and remember that. That's not necessarily worth celebrating.

Seth Moeller: Jeff, we jumped right into what happens during and following a crisis. Let's just back up a little bit. What advice do you have for employers who perhaps have not given this a lot of thought? What are some basic things that people can do to prepare for a disruptive event?

Jeff Gorter: Among the things that I often encourage is first and foremost have an EAP, have an employee assistance program, because EAPs are able to offer that subject matter expertise to be able to help not just devise a single plan for a particular type of event but to have a wellness structure to really tap into the heartiness of an organization, to make them ready to respond to an event like that. That's what EAPs are able to do for organization that incorporate their EAP.

Second to that, I would say, have a plan. By a plan, I would say an all-hazards plan. So often what people do is they will say, "All right. We need to devise a plan on the last disaster, on the last thing that happened. We're experts on the thing that happened three months ago." There's no way that you can say, "All right. Here's my active shooter plan. Here's my toxic chemical plan. Here's my retail robbery plan." You couldn't devise enough plans to anticipate what the next possible bad thing could be.

Seth Moeller: Right.

Jeff Gorter: An all-hazard plan says that I have about 80 percent of it ready. I know what I'm going to do when some kind of crisis hits. Then we tweak the remaining 20 percent based on the uniqueness of the event that strikes.

I think a third thing that organizations can do in preparation is to not just have the plan but communicate the plan. Often what organizations will do is they'll say, "Yup. We got our three-ring binder. We've got it all set and it's on a shelf. I can tell you where it is." It's not looked at or picked up again in two or three years and then a crisis happens and nobody even knows ...

Seth Moeller: Right. When it's hitting the fan do you think to yourself, "Wait a minute. There must be a binder for this."

Jeff Gorter: "There's got to be a three-ring binder that's going to pull me through this."

Seth Moeller: "Let's go find that."

Jeff Gorter: Finding the plan, communicating the plan, drilling to the plan is just a wise ...

Seth Moeller: Even an open discussion among manager groups around, "Here are the kinds of things that we have to ..." It doesn't have to be an A to B to C specific plan but just let's talk about how we respond.

Jeff Gorter: That's instrumental in, again the idea that we've got a plan, we know what we're going to do. Now we may change it based on who knows what the event might be but it's always easier to amend a plan than to try and make one up from scratch in the middle of a crisis.

Seth Moeller: Jeff, this has been very informative. Even though I work in the field I do always learn from you whenever we talk. Thanks for sharing your time, your experience, and your knowledge today. I appreciate it.

Jeff Gorter: Thank you so much, Seth. It's been an honor.

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