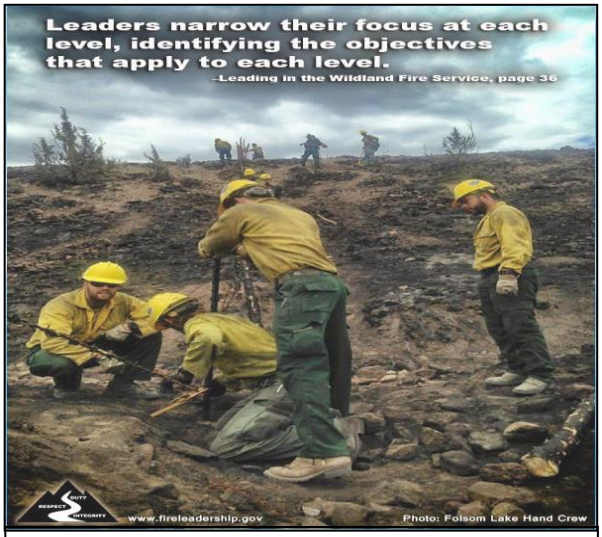
Interagency Critical Incident Stress Management Program

# Crisis Leadership




**"The demonstration of caring is more important than all other leadership traits combined…..Caring during crisis response is not a feeling. Caring is a set of corporate and personal behaviors that elicit the perception that you and your organization truly care."**

**"People tend to be resilient and have coping mechanisms that allow them to return to a state of balance that is much the same as prior to the crisis situation or event. This is not to say that those who experience devastating events will not experience difficult adjustments. They will. But we know from experience that human beings in crisis are adaptable.**

**Most people will recover and the recovery process can be accelerated when leaders and managers offer and provide support."**

**Bruce T. Blythe**
Author of Blindsided, a Manager's Guide to Crisis Leadership

**Crisis Leadership:** is more about who you are than what you know. Effective leaders connect deeply with their people, nowhere more than during a crisis. No set of preparedness strategies, or leadership techniques, will overcome a lack of character, ethics or integrity.

**Communication:** is the single most important action you can take. The process involves not only how you listen in order to obtain the facts but also how well you speak openly and clearly with those impacted, their families, cooperators, upper level management and the public.

**Anticipation:** Good crisis leaders look out the windshield of the crisis to identify what is on the horizon and balance their perspectives on immediate and short-term focus; keeping in mind where they and the organization may be headed.

**Delegate:** The only way to manage rapidly emerging issues following a critical event is to utilize resources available to you. Assess priority issues and enlist available persons to take action on the delegated tasks. Doing so puts you in a position to continue addressing the crisis.

**Reactions:** Ultimately, strategic crisis management is about managing the reactions of people. Whether the crisis involves multiple deaths or injuries, a suicide or other incident, the steps you take will be to manage the reactions of people.

**Be visible, open, and available:** Highly visible leaders who communicate directly with employees tend to be more effective than those who are not accessible and communicate through email rather than in person.

## Confidence in Leadership, Their Mission and Hope for the Future

Leadership is always an opportunity to reinforce and build trust, confidence, and workplace cohesiveness. When done well, employees will feel cared about, supported, and secure in the knowledge that leadership is both compassionate and competent.

Feeling cared about and supported in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event is hugely important in the healing and recovery process.

## Support after a Critical Incident

**Safety:**

- Ensure physical safety: remove people from the incident site and treat their physical injuries.
- Avoid unnecessary exposure of other staff, media, and the public.

**The Single Most Important Action is Calm Effective Communication:**

- Don't be afraid to say, "*I don't know*." Particularly in the first few hours after a tragedy, information will be scarce and likely inaccurate.
- Keep staff informed and prevent the spread of rumors. Provide information about the status of the event, any ongoing emergency support, and the health status of anyone who has been injured.
- Avoid statements like "it will be alright" or "I know how you feel." Phrases such as these may cause an individual to think their feelings are not understood.

**Connectedness with Peers, the Organization, Family**

- Don't send people home or put them on leave if at all possible. It is far better (i.e. less likely post traumatic illness symptoms will follow) if they get on with a routine and are with "the team."
- Immediate support is best provided by being with and sharing experiences with work colleagues and friends, rather than separating them.
- Wherever possible, re-establish normal working routines as soon as possible, albeit gently and flexibly, and enable people to talk about what has happened as they work, thereby avoiding any onset of denial.
- If leave is required find out what employees are planning to do with their time once they leave work and check in with them by phone. Encourage them to spend time with friends or family members.

**The Skills and Resources to Cope**

- Ask employees and managers to be on the lookout for those who are in obvious need of help and bring them to your attention.
- Consider professional crisis intervention.
- Employees who have experienced trauma respond best to information, structure, and instructions on what to expect next.

## What Happens to Managers after a Critical Incident?

Managers who have experienced a critical incident offer these insights on what they experienced after the incident.

**Effects on Managers**

- "I was surrounded by people, but felt all alone."
- Others have been through similar things like **this**, but no one has been through **this** (my situation and the loss, injury or other events involving **this** organization and **these** individuals.)
- "After the death, I recognized responsibilities that I didn't even know I had."
- The difficulty of losing an employee who is also a dear friend and how to address the multiple facets that the loss represents.
- The feeling that, as a manager, you must "be the things to all people" and the effects that has on personal and professional life.
- The difficulty and importance of seeking and accepting help.
- How a critical incident affects the manager's family, especially the spousal relationship.
- A critical incident, especially a line of duty death often affects the way managers feel about the work they have always loved. "I used to look forward to fighting fires. Now I dread it when I get the call."
- Some managers felt relief that they pushed hard for safety before the incident. Others felt frustrated that they had done everything right and still experienced severe injury or lost someone.
- Feelings of guilt and responsibility. "Could I have done more?"
- There is no way around feeling guilt after a critical incident not matter what the circumstances. But you can't let it consume you or play the "what if game."
- "The experience forced me to learn. "