



Association for Workplace Tragedy Family Support

Threads of Life White Paper

Workplace tragedy: Employer communication and crisis response

Introduction

No one wants it to happen. No one wants to have to call in the labour ministry to investigate an injury or death. Certainly no one wants to have to call a family and tell them a father, son, sister or daughter has been injured at work. Most companies do all they can to prevent workplace injuries and deaths. But according to the AWCBC, roughly 900 homes this year alone will receive a call to tell them a loved one has been killed at work. Thousands more will be told a family member is in the hospital with a serious injury.

If a serious workplace incident does happen, the employer's response to it, and their treatment of the worker and family, can make an enormous difference in how the family deals with the tragedy and heals afterwards. A procedure for communication and relationship with the family should be incorporated into every company's emergency plan and integrated into their safety management program and system.

Background

Threads of Life, the Association for Workplace Tragedy Family Support, surveyed its members to gather their impressions of how they were treated by the employer in the aftermath of either a workplace fatality, or a life-altering injury. Roughly 35 responses from across Canada provide anecdotal evidence towards developing a best practice for employers' response to workplace tragedy. The life-altering injuries and deaths referred to by survey respondents ranged from fairly recent (two to three years) to those a decade or more in the past.

Sadly, the survey indicates companies are generally doing a poor job of dealing with workers and families following a tragedy. Simply asking family members and injured workers the questions in our survey can uncover anger and bitterness that's still close to the surface many years later. These feelings, along with unanswered questions about what happened to their loved one, may extend or set back the individual's emotional and mental healing after a tragedy. The costs include not only mental and physical costs to the individual, but the economic costs of lost productivity, and reputational costs to the company. The reverse is also true, of course: in the best cases, families feel supported and cared about by a company and community. This can aid in their healing following their own serious injury, or the death or injury of a loved one.

Findings

While the Threads of Life survey is not scientific, it accurately captures families' perceptions of the way companies both large and small deal with family members after a serious workplace incident, and reflects the impact that treatment can have on the family.

Findings: Positive experiences

- Exactly half of employers provided some sort of support to the family following a workplace death or serious injury. This support was most often financial (assistance with funeral costs, compensation claims etc). When it was offered, this support was found to be helpful by 71 per cent of respondents.
- In the case of fatalities, more than half of employers attended the funeral. This was generally appreciated by families.

Comments: "I did not want their involvement with any of the planning or speaking at the service. I did appreciate that they attended the service. It showed me that they cared."

"The employer closed down the [worksite] for the funeral so that all employees could attend. I felt they did the right thing and it showed respect by doing so."

- While less than half of employers took steps to honour the injured or killed employee afterwards, some of the efforts they did take showed sensitivity and were much appreciated by the workers and families. These included sending flowers to the funeral, planting a tree, sponsoring a memorial bench on a trail, donating for a scholarship, and supporting the families' fundraising for Steps for Life.

Comments: "They made a large donation to [the regional] Brain Injury Association, which was the chosen charity in lieu of flowers. [My spouse] died from a severe brain injury."

"This company went above and beyond and promised our family they would never forget our son and would do whatever they could to ensure that it would never happen again. That is all we can ask of them."

- A prompt and compassionate response by the employer can make a major difference in a family's healing from either a loved one's death or an injury.

Comments: "The support I felt, helped me. His tears touched me as genuine grief. He really felt what I was going through."

"It helped that we were involved. When all your questions are answered you can work on yourself instead of being angry for the unknown."

"This relationship was very important to our family. We felt that they sincerely cared about us and would do whatever they could to help us through the difficult times."

Findings: Negative experiences

- In two-thirds of cases, a representative of the employer did not come to the family's home to tell them about the death or injury, most often leaving this duty to the police. The surveys revealed many negative experiences related to how the family was informed of the tragedy, and the employer's behavior.
- In 56 per cent of responses, no information was provided to the family about what happened. Respondents understood that the incident was under investigation, and the employer might not have much information either, but they expressed a desperate need to know what happened to their loved one and how.

Comments: "We needed to hear 'I'm sorry!' 'Nobody ever said 'I'm sorry!' The incident report had discrepancies and much was blacked out. I needed to know exactly what had happened."

"I had so many questions as we all did. I wanted to know how? What would make something like this happen, did he suffer?"

"I personally needed to know everything, the unknown when going through this horrible tragedy was worse than knowing the facts. Even though I don't remember everything they told me.... at the time it helped ground me when I got answers to my questions!"

- Especially in cases of workplace injury, there were many examples where the employer cut off communication or contact with the injured employee.
- Less than half of employers did anything to honour the employee who had been injured or killed.
- For 65 per cent of respondents, the employer did not sustain any longer term relationship with the family.

Comments: "They acted like they didn't know me. It was difficult to get assistance... It was heart breaking. I had worked with and for these people for almost two years."

Comments: "They soon shut up and we were told we were not able to contact them as there was an investigation going on. They became very cold which was hard to handle."

"I would say that my healing has stalled. I am at a place where I can't get past the fact that they have basically "forgotten" about me. That is what it seems like anyways."

Recommendations

Given the devastating circumstances, nothing the employer does after the tragedy will make things "right". There is no perfect response. In answer to the question "what could the employer have done better?" one family member responded "BEFORE the tragedy...FIXED THE EQUIPMENT. After the tragedy...fixed the equipment ASAP." It's too late for "before the tragedy" but there are steps an employer can take after the tragedy, which may help to mitigate the emotional damage. These steps should be considered for inclusion in the company's emergency plan and safety program.

1. Go

It may be the most difficult thing a senior manager, CEO or human resources professional ever has to do, but it is highly recommended that a senior representative of the company go to see the family.

If the employer has the duty to inform the family, in person, of a workplace death or serious injury, the ideal would be to send a small team, including a senior manager, a staff person or workplace friend who knows the family, and a mental health professional, counsellor or member of the clergy (see Sources). The team must be prepared to face strong emotions and shock. Before a tragedy, seek out training and resources and ensure the appropriate representatives are skilled in dealing with critical incidents, and communicating about and during tragedies.

In many situations, it may not be possible that the employer be the one to inform the family in person of an injury or death – urgency may demand that the police be called or the news be conveyed by telephone. Nevertheless, it's very important that the company demonstrate its compassion and commitment to the family by visiting the house, or if appropriate, visiting the hospital as soon as possible.

2. Tell

The importance of information was emphasized in every response to the Threads of Life survey. However, companies feel constrained by both legal concerns and their lack of complete knowledge about the circumstances of the injury or death. Have an internal discussion ahead of time, with legal consultation, about what the company representatives may and may not say. Ideally, companies should develop a response plan and policy on communication before it is ever required, and make both available to anyone who may be called upon to communicate with the family in the event of an incident.

Offer the family what information you can about what happened, acknowledging that you don't know all the details. Let them know there will be an investigation, and provide assurance that you will do all in your power to prevent further tragedies. Advise them about the process of reporting, investigation and compensation including what you will do as the employer, and anything the family needs to do.

However, do not say or promise anything you don't absolutely know to be true. Keep in mind that, as the tragedy is so recent, the family members may not be taking in all you tell them. Make a return visit to offer any updates and repeat the information.

It is most meaningful for the families to hear empathy. Above all, be human and compassionate. Express sorrow.

3. Support

There are forms of support, both immediate and longer-term, which are meaningful to and appreciated by a family in the wake of a serious workplace injury or death. In some cases these are simple things – staying with the individual until another family member can arrive, driving

relatives to the hospital, making phone calls to clergy and others. Ask what you can do to help – even if the assistance is not required, the offer may be a step toward building a relationship.

In the days and weeks following a workplace tragedy, families offered examples of company representatives visiting in hospital, cleaning out a young man’s apartment, and handling tasks like driving the injured or deceased person’s vehicle home. Many employers also offer to assist with funeral costs or top up coverage provided by the compensation board for funeral expenses, or to cover any travel or accommodation costs involved in travelling to the hospital or the work location. Again, make no assumptions about what will be helpful and ask what the family needs. However, only offer what you know you can fulfill, and if you make an offer of assistance, be sure to follow through.

4. Honour

One thing many families both dread and resent is the idea that the workplace has simply moved on, and the worker has been forgotten. Families understand that the work goes on, but they value companies’ efforts to honour the worker. In the case of a fatality, attending the funeral – and perhaps more importantly allowing the co-workers to attend – is an obvious first step. “Many of his co-workers were there. I gave every one of them a hug and held grown men as they wept and told me stories about my son. I will never forget their kindness,” one family member said. Families had mixed feelings about senior managers attending, but in most cases welcomed the affected worker’s colleagues.

Among survey respondents, in the best cases employers honoured workers by creating a lasting memorial, for example:

- Planted a tree and had a memory stone made
- Created a plaque and gave it to the family
- Organized a memorial event at the workplace and invited the family
- Donated to a charity of the family’s choosing in honour of the worker
- Donated to a scholarship fund established by the family
- Dedicated or named something (a garage, a park, a boat) in honour of the worker
- Sent flowers to the cemetery each year on the anniversary of the death
- Placed a memorial in the newspaper on the anniversary of the death
- Supported the family’s fundraising for Steps for Life – Walking for Families of Workplace Tragedy events

One critical way employers can honour a worker is by conducting a thorough investigation and implementing changes to ensure the hazards involved in the tragedy are eliminated or controlled. As part of the communication and response plan, it is important to communicate the steps being taken by the company. Families will be relieved to know further tragedies will be prevented, even though it comes too late for their loved one.

5. Keep in touch

Injured workers and their families in particular spoke of being cut off and isolated from their former workplace. Following fatalities, companies often break off contact with the family once the funeral is over.

For injured workers, the employer can make efforts to keep them in the loop and connected to colleagues at work – not only does this help the worker’s mental well-being, it could make a future return to work smoother. For any workplace tragedy, family should be informed of the progress of the investigation and/or inquest. Families were touched when company representatives visited or phoned regularly, sent a card and continued to remember the injured or deceased employee months and years after the tragedy. Families appreciated when an employer maintained “open lines of communication” with them.

“My spouse's boss touched base by phone with me every couple of days while [my spouse] was in hospital, and then once he died the boss contacted me approximately once a month for a year. This helped me to feel they (his work) had not forgotten about [my spouse] and his family. This really helped to console us, and made us feel like they actually cared.”

Conclusion

Most companies will do all they can to prevent serious injuries and fatalities in their workplaces, both for moral and economic reasons. But if a tragedy does occur, the response the company makes to the worker and family can be instrumental in how the family copes with the tragedy, how quickly and fully they heal, and their long-term perception of the employer company. While the Threads of Life survey focused on the experience of families, it can certainly be concluded that honouring an injured or deceased worker and assisting the worker’s family will also help co-workers who may be grieving a colleague. Even more important for the company, it builds on their culture of safety and demonstrates that they care and are with their employees for the entire journey.

Sadly, it appears not many employers do a great job of communicating with and supporting families after a tragedy in the workplace. Financial support is fairly common, and is generally found to be helpful for families faced by unexpected expenses, and in some cases suddenly having lost the income of one of the family’s principle wage earners. But beyond short and long term financial needs, families have a deep thirst for information – both immediately after the tragedy and over time. The company’s response to a family’s emotional, mental and physical needs can have a major impact – either positive or negative – in how the family reacts to the tragedy, how their healing proceeds, and in their impressions of the company over time.

Employers can make a difference to the family by making the effort to go and see the family as soon as possible after the tragedy, providing as much information as possible, offering short-term and long-term support based on the family’s needs, honouring the worker, and continuing to maintain communication with the family. These steps should be built into a company’s communication and crisis response plan, and safety management system, with roles and training identified as appropriate.

Sources:

Notifying survivors about sudden, unexpected deaths -

<http://www.cinj.org/sites/cinj/files/documents/Notifying%20survivors%20about%20sudden%20unexpected%20deaths.pdf>

Communicating in a Crisis, Accident Prevention magazine January/February 2007

<http://threadsoflife.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/article-crisis.pdf>

Lost-time claim statistics, fatality statistics, Association of Workers Compensation Boards of Canada, http://awcbc.org/?page_id=14, accessed July 26, 2016

Appendix: Advice from families

The final question asked of families was “Do you have any recommendations for employers that might help families going through this in the future?” The comments below are the direct responses of the family members, with some editing for spelling and to ensure privacy. These responses represent the ideal expressed by families who have lived through a workplace tragedy. While companies may not be able to carry out all their suggestions, their perspective is a valuable insight for employers dealing with the aftermath of an on-the-job injury or death. Some comments mention the importance of an employer apologizing – please refer to Section 2 in the report under Recommendations for more information about providing information and expressing empathy.

- Regardless of the circumstances, be kind. If they are not able to deal with things in a kind and empathetic manner, then get someone to do it for them. Even in just explaining things like insurances. Also, it isn't something that needs to be done the very next day.
- Have compassion for injured workers. 90% of us would love to be working and because of one short moment, our lives were changed forever. I understand how they are out money for premiums and in business, the bottom line is important, yet I wonder. How much is a normal life worth these days?
- Pay attention to what culture shift really means, walk the talk.
- I believe, the initial visit after is extremely important and attending the funeral. As well as maybe giving them support in connecting with Threads of Life.
- I think that they should be caring and respectful of what the family is going through. Each case should be handled as an individual.
- Ask what the family may need first. Be transparent - answer questions so that families will have some answers. Keep families in mind when policies are changed and safety practices are looked at. Apologize.
- Don't worry so much about the money or how it looks on the organization and start to remember if not for the employees working there then you'd be nothing ... It's time to start caring about the employees and stop putting their reputation first.
- In the case of a fatality; honour the worker...ensure the family needs are addressed and offer assistance where needed. Keep them informed of the results of any investigations conducted. Provide info about agencies that can provide assistance such as Threads of Life. An injured worker...keep in regular contact and assistance where needed. Ensure they remain part of the work family and where possible participate in any workplace events. Even if unable to work, allow visits to the workplace to maintain a connection with coworkers etc.
- Communicate with the family and let them know what happened.
- Be open to the families and let the families do what they want and not be led by the company in their decisions. My case is very different than most as I also worked for the same company. If you work for the same company they should not push you out of your position and tell you that they do not think you can do the job anymore.
- Follow up. Do not cut communication lines. Do not treat the family like a WCB case and additional paperwork. Especially in [my son's] case. I feel as though it was an incident

that could have been prevented but no single person is to blame. I, personally, have not laid blame. But, to just hear words from the experts as to what they thought went wrong may help the process of coming to terms with it. We pieced a story together...that's where most of the sleepless nights came from. I do understand that the employer may be going through some grieving processes of their own. But to make the family feel like a WCB claim is not ok. Human compassion goes a long way in the process following the incident.

- Stand behind the injured worker and make sure they are getting good care. Do not make them feel like they are not important and do not make them do work no one else wants to do. I often wonder if I had not felt pushed to do things, if my injury would not have been as bad as it has gotten now.
- No matter what the circumstances, own your part in the injury or death. I realize that's a tall order considering the legalities of the situation however you owe the truth to that employee or to their families in case of fatality. You owe the truth to yourself as well. Explain how things happened. Be involved. Do whatever is reasonably asked of you.
- The little things can mean so much. Flowers...having the "guts" to show up at the hospital, even on the chance that the family might not appreciate it (and understanding if they don't) I did, but some families might not...offering to attend to something personally that could be difficult for the family...returning any belongings that might be in the company's possession as promptly as possible...understanding when a family's anger is directed at them. I imagine it is a little different with a big corporation than with a small family business, but as simple as it sounds, remembering compassion for the family.
- Yes. Employers should consider taking a step back and to try and put themselves in the shoes of the deceased's family. A death, critical injury or occupational illness in the workplace is completely unacceptable and yet this provides an employer with an opportunity to change and prevent it from occurring again in the future. If the employer conducted a thorough investigation of the incident, several recommendations would present themselves. It is these recommendations and forward movement from the incident that I feel would provide some sense of comfort being communicated to the family members knowing that an employer recognizes their responsibility and is willing to recognize their shortfalls in their business and that moving forward they will ensure that this will not happen to another worker. I know if my father's employer communicated this, it would have assisted in my healing, rather than say nothing at all. An employer saying nothing at all in this situation shows me they do not care and are willing to let this happen to other workers.
- Take care of the loved ones and be honest with them. The unknown is so much worse.
- It is in my opinion essential for the employer to show compassion and a sense of support to the family, not only in the beginning and during the tragedy but ongoing support in the sense of a simple thinking of you card on the anniversary date (none of us ever forget that tragic day and that anniversary date impacts us forever), and sponsorship or participating in the Steps for Life walk. [My spouse's] employer stopped responding to my emails re: my request for sponsorship for the Steps for Life walk. It was devastating

to my family because it felt like they didn't care, that they have completely forgotten him, and our family didn't matter anymore.

- The employers need to understand that although life goes on, after their employee dies and is no longer here, life is gone as we know it, and we live with this loss forever! A simple acknowledgment re: the loss of our loved one on the anniversary date or participating in any capacity of the Steps for Life walk or Threads of Life would be very important in the healing process.
- The only way to help is to be honest and real. Once they Lawyer up it becomes a whole different ball game.
- Long term support... losing your health or a loved one doesn't go away...the families live with this every day.
- Provide support and some answers when asked by the family. We got nothing!!
- Stay connected. Say you're sorry the incident happened. Stop being afraid you might be sued. Offer support to the family and to the coworkers who are there at the time of an incident. I often think about the impact the death had on our son's coworkers.
- Be honest, truthful. Take responsibility for the accident. Admit what happened and work to ensure that it doesn't happen again. We could support each other through an extremely difficult time.
- Not communicating with the family is one of the biggest mistakes an employer can make. Please make sure to recognize the situation even if you can't give any real information. Most people just want to know that you cared for your employee. That he or she was not just a number.
- I think every tragedy that happens in the workplace demands heartfelt response from employers, personally visiting the families involved and also meeting with the rest of the workplace staff to provide a safe environment so that problems are rectified.
- Honouring the loved one really helped me. They held a memorial service for the two families when they planted the tree and placed the memory stone.
- Don't let this type of thing happen in your workplace. Treat the employee and their family how you would want to be treated if you were in their position.
- Make sure other employees know what happened and that they act compassionately. In my case I was still in the hospital at the time of the investigation and to this day (38 years later) have not been able to get or see a copy of the accident report, nor has anyone asked for my opinion.
- I think showing some compassion after an accident or a death would be a good start
- Please reach out to the families, reach out more than once. Offer support, drop by and don't cut them off. This was one of the hardest things I endured and this made it harder. Even at the trial they were cold and cut off and the co-workers who were questioned told lies.
- Be open and honest and show that they recognize that they are dealing with human beings whose lives have been shattered. The lives lost are not just numbers and neither are the families left behind to grieve.
- I appreciate the fact that they came to my home, told me to call if I needed anything. I wish they knew my son, and called him by name. I felt that he was just another employee

to them and they didn't show much emotion. Don't tell the mother or wife that [the worker was] responsible for their death. Let the facts and courts determine that.

- Be open and honest with families and provide support where needed
- Be honest and upfront about what happened and do not put the family through further hell fighting you when they have already lost so much.