Surviving crises in the workplace

by Ed Wandtke

Most of us are aware of the feelings and emotions we experience when being told a family member has died, or have received a call to go to a hospital because an injured friend is being rushed there.

When a crisis occurs, all other concerns come to a sudden halt.

With changing technology, a smarter workforce and more dependence on high technology, we have become dependent on technological innovations. The price for technological advancements may be an increased opportunity for a crisis.

Learning how to plan for, and deal with, crises often helps to simplify the crisis when it occurs. You, as an owner/manager, can take several steps to make crises easier to deal with:

1) Plan for the unexpected. You might deal with unexpected problems each day: a sudden weather change, a sick technician, a truck accident. All of these situations can cause a crisis, but if you have advance contingency plans, you will find these crises are only inconveniences. For example, having an extra truck available and an extra technician for the busy season is a good way to ensure that work gets done.

2) Recognize emotion when it impacts you on the job. We often pretend that emotions don’t influence us in our business actions, especially in this male-dominated green industry. But when a crisis does occur at work, emotions really come into full view. Don’t let these emotions take over and rule your actions.

Employees can be a source of strength when the company goes through an unfortunate and/or unexpected turn of events.

Remember, you need to remain as objective and as understanding as possible.

3) Recognize the supporting cast. When the company successfully survives a crisis, sometimes the managers get most of the credit. But if your company is faced with hard times, your employees are the ones who often pick up the slack and pull it through. Giving your employees the recognition they deserve is a sign of a company that knows the true value of an employee.

4) Handle change with flexible employees. It is amazing how well we can deal with change. When weather influences a planned activity on a given day, we are forced to change the schedule. Most companies have learned to deal with change, and many owners even put extra stress on their companies when they change their minds from morning to evening. Make sure, as owner, that you strive to be consistent. Employees are asked to deal with enough change, so owners should be the stability they can count on.

5) Don’t create your own crises. One aspect of most businesses is the need for secrets and confidential information. “Who knows what” is often a very discomforting situation among employees. If someone is being fired and someone else finds out in advance, distrust is provoked. Employees like to know where they stand in order to feel in control of their own destinies.

6) Keep your goals in aim. Often, a crisis will cause many employees to suddenly rush to solve a new and unusual problem. Who then takes command to refocus the employees back on goals? In many companies, I have seen too much time wasted on activities that will not increase profitability or goal achievement. Many companies, however, have found that using an industry-experienced consultant to be effective. The tips and suggestions you receive from such an individual can help you dispose of useless activities and help keep you and your employees focused.

Crisis, though infrequent, can be a real trial. Learning how to deal with a crisis, having an individual ready to back up your positions, and knowing when to seek outside help can make crisis resolution easier.

Remember, crises usually happen when you think you have every base covered. Advance planning and knowing where to get assistance will help you make it through whatever might arise and make your company more resilient.

—Ed Wandtke is a principle in Wandtke & Associates, 2586 Oakstone Dr., Columbus, OH 43231. For further information about the items covered in this article, phone (614) 891-3111.