

Crisis Care - support for victims and their families as the third pillar of crisis management

Companies and organisations risk considerable damage to their reputation, if they fail to apply the necessary professionalism and prudence when taking care of victims and their families during and after a critical incident.

A negative example is the high-profile criticism of the relatives of the victims of the terrorist attack at a Berlin Christmas market. A professional and well-structured crisis management and crisis care programme would have helped victims' families.

Another case: Three people died in the crash of the Asiana Airlines passenger aircraft in the USA, several of the 291 passengers were injured. Because the airline initiated the family care too late and did not pass on information to relatives quickly enough, the FAA imposed a fine of half a million US dollars on the airline.

Five Statoil employees died during the hostage-taking on In-Anemas gas field in Algeria. Statoil immediately set up near their corporate headquarters in Norway a family care centre and assigned over 90 employees to support families that came seeking for help and answers. In a very short time the company was able to take care of the relatives of victims. Statoil had an appropriate procedure in place and had trained employees for such a task beforehand.

The examples show that during and after large incidents, crisis care is essential. However, it is also required for emergency management cases which have lower organisational and public dimensions but still require the same attention: events such as deadly car accidents, unlawful detention during business trips, loss of contact to business travellers, medical emergencies just to mention a few of them. It is essential that organisations have robust procedures in place to respond to the event and at the same time take care of the family members of those affected.

Expectations of relatives after critical events

Family members of victims expect empathy during and after they have been hit by an incident. The indignation was understandable when Malaysia Airlines informed the family members via text message about the plane crash and the probable death of their relatives. In the case of the terrorist attack in Berlin the relatives of the victims were irritated about the invoice that was sent to them in a very bureaucratic German by the Charité Hospital in Berlin for the autopsy of the victims.

For family members it is important to quickly travel to the scene of the incident to see where their loved ones died. It is urgent for them to know how they died and why this could not be prevented. Relatives search for something meaningful in the loss - even if it is "only" that something similar will not happen to others in future. Businesses should actively support families, for example through serious investigations into the incident and the lessons that can be learned from it.

After the incident, the normal life of the family members ends without warning and they require help. During the active shooter incident in Las Vegas in October 2017, an employee of Ernst & Young, who was there privately, was seriously injured and fell in coma. Her employer immediately sent an employee from California to the Las Vegas to support the family in practical and administrative matters.

The consequences if the care of relatives does not go well

Once the trust of family members during the crisis has been lost, it is almost impossible to restore it - the trust is irretrievable. Families now go their own way: they allow for example that investigative media pays specialized lawyers to take action against employers. In return, they hand over their personality rights to the media company. A different reaction has been seen in many kidnapping cases, when families open a direct channel of communication with the perpetrators as they no longer trust the company or the authorities.

It is in the interest of companies to quickly provide the necessary attention to the relatives of the victims. If they fail to do so, others will give the family the attention and promote their own interests. However, the media and the public are often not the appropriate advisors for the families from the companies' point of view and also from the families' perspective.

There is state support for families in Germany, however the question arises as to how reliable and professional this is. The incident at the Breitscheidplatz in Berlin is an example of inadequate help. Without the commitment of individuals, the suffering for families would probably have been even more severe. In another case the police family support after the kidnapping of the wife of a bank executive from Heidenheim was not a glorious chapter either. For example, some of the police family liaison officers could not be reached by telephone. Further, the decision to publicly contact the kidnappers via television by the father and his two children was counterproductive and even controversial within the police. There are certainly examples of successful state family care, but companies should be able to act independently in crisis management and by no means be dependent on state actions.

How companies should prepare themselves

At first view, what needs to be done in terms of family care may seem trivial. But without the right preparation, breakdowns are inevitable. Crisis care is an important pillar within crisis management.

For affected companies, an incident suddenly raises many questions, such as: Who is responsible within the organization to support the victims and family members? How shall the company handle the information management during and after the incident? Does the company have a care team and has it been prepared to manage such cases? Are there guidelines and instructions available? How much support shall the company provide and are there limits? In which cases should the company management have direct contact with the families?

Further information

You can learn more about victim and family care and other aspects of crisis management in our guideline "Crisis management and crisis communication in the event of a terrorist attack or active shooter incident". The guideline is available on our website.

<https://www.smartrisksolutions.de/resources.html>

Professional family care enables relatives to regain control of their own lives step by step. It is not only psychological help, but also practical everyday help. Those assigned to family care must be reliable and trustworthy, i.e. they must be available by telephone 24/7 and meet agreed times.

Often, direct colleagues of victims or HR employees are assigned to support the families. Due to a lack of preparation, they quickly feel overwhelmed and there is a great deal of uncertainty in dealing with the relatives of the victims.

Politicians usually promise unbureaucratic aid after an incident, but in reality, there is always bureaucracy involved. After an incident, simple things such as filling out forms overburdens many families.

Some cases can catch prolonged media and public attention. Families may need to be shielded from the media or prepared to deal with journalists and the increased public interest.

Ideally, companies should have the following in place:

- A crisis management handbook and procedures
- A corporate policy for victim and family care with specified responsibilities
- A procedure that regulates the flow of information and communication between the organisation, victims and their families and external stakeholders
- Guidelines and trainings for the employees who will be assigned to the family care teams
- Contacts to external agencies and consultants who can provide professional help
- Crisis and emergency management exercises that include victim and family care

When companies state that employees are their most precious asset, this should also be reflected in their crisis management. A real "caring" for the workforce and their families pays off for companies in the long term.

The author, Pascal Michel, is managing director of SmartRiskSolutions GmbH, which specializes in security and crisis management. Together with psychologists, the company develops concepts for victim and family care that are closely linked to crisis management.
www.smartrisksolutions.de