

A woman in a dark business suit stands in a field of tall grass, holding a large black umbrella. The sky is filled with dark, dramatic clouds, suggesting an approaching storm. The woman is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The overall mood is one of resilience and preparedness.

“This management experience and memory will stay with me. I hope I will not have to use this skill set again, but if I do, I will be better prepared.”

THE **One**
THEY DIDN'T
*prepare
me for*

Know how to personally approach death and crises to effectively traverse future difficult situations

You may know the situation—your BlackBerry® will not stop buzzing in the middle of an important meeting. You try to ignore it, but you know the familiar four-buzz grouping means that someone is trying to call you in a most urgent fashion. You are just about to excuse yourself and find out why they are calling when the human resources director pops her head in the door and asks if she can speak with you for a moment. Her face is somber, and you begin to wonder what is going on.

As you step out of the meeting, the HR director begins to tell you that there has been an accident at the landfill. Initial reports are that one of the city employees has been killed.

The next thing you know you are driving to the site with the HR director. Being a first-time manager, you are in a slight state of confusion. Are you supposed to go to the site? Who is supposed to be there, and what should be happening? What will you do when you get to the site? What is the manager supposed to do, and who should be contacted and when?

As soon as you get to the landfill, one of the police officers approaches you with an apology and advice to not go and look at the scene. The officer describes it in enough detail that you decide to heed his advice and wait by the car. As the employee's supervisor leaves the scene and approaches you, you instinctively know what your role will be in the coming hours—it will be communication and support.

It has taken almost two years to be able to put pen to paper and write about an experience that none of my former bosses, mentors, or institutes of higher education ever prepared me for—a workplace fatality. The city I had the privilege of managing had 270 employees, and I knew them all—not just by name.

I tried to know every employee's family situation and their interests outside of their work with the city. Now, granted, this can be a challenge in getting to know employees who work only the night shift by themselves at the water treatment plant, but I always found that there were opportunities to meet and get to know them all.

Even when this meant going to 10 p.m. briefings, I appreciated the opportunity. Little did I know how much

easier the tasks at hand would be with the employee knowledge and familiarity I had prior to the fatal accident.

Next Steps

After leaving the scene of the accident and confirming where the employee's wife worked, we went to her workplace. Her coworkers had been told and had cleared the work area except for her closest friend at work. In attendance from the city were the employee's supervisor, the police chaplain, and I.

One of the most heartbreaking situations I have ever been through was talking to her and watching her hear the news that her husband had been killed. There are not enough words of comfort, tissues, or physical gestures to help someone through that kind of pain. We arranged for her to be taken home where family was beginning to gather.

In a small town, news travels fast, and we were not surprised to learn how many people were showing up at the employee's parents' house, which was the hub for all of their family gatherings. We stayed briefly and left business cards to let them know how to reach us.

As we returned to the city, I began to call councilmembers to let them know of the tragic accident. After reaching most of them, we went back to the employee's work group to let them know what had happened. By then, even those who weren't working that day had heard the news and had gathered in the employee break room.

We gave them information in sufficient detail, assured them that we would find out what happened so it would not endanger any other employees in the future, and let them have time to reflect on the employee's work and personal passions. Again, having a good familiarity with everyone and their situations helped me communicate effectively and provide some solace to the coworkers who were still in shock at the sudden loss.

Needed Skills

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the workplace fatality rate de-



clined from 4.0 to 3.8 deaths per 10,000 workers from 2002 to 2007. Although our workplaces may be getting safer, this does not preclude the possibility of dealing with a workplace fatality. Most of us think fatalities usually occur in public safety positions, but that has not been true in Texas.

According to a report from the Texas Municipal League Intergovernmental Risk Pool, there were 22 fatality claims in Texas cities from 2003 through 2008. Only nine (40 percent) were employees from police or fire departments.

No one ever anticipates needing the skills to deal with workplace fatalities, but such skills can be useful in a variety of settings. According to industry experts, these steps can be important for coworkers:

- Arrange for a meeting to give employees a chance to grieve and share their feelings. Sudden, accidental, or violent deaths may require additional opportunities for people to talk.
- Sometimes employee groups will choose someone to serve as the liaison to the family to organize the expression of sympathy through flowers, food, cards, donations, and so forth. This is often someone close to the coworker who may already know the family.
- Those who were particularly close with the deceased may need additional support. Be sure to let employees know about the city's employee assistance program. This additional support may be needed many months after the tragedy.
- Take time to grieve. Honor in an appropriate way the person who died. Let employees find a way to express their feelings by:

- » Creating a memorial board or book.
- » Collecting money for a charitable donation.
- » Holding or participating in a fund-raiser.
- » Creating an office memory book for the family.
- » Sharing tributes in employee newsletters.

- » Conducting a workplace-only event for coworkers to acknowledge their notable relationships with the deceased.
- » Attending the funeral or memorial service.
- » Bringing in help if you need it; a trained grief counselor can meet and talk with the staff.

People handle grief in many different ways. Each manager's style for handling grief and death needs to be incorporated into communicating and dealing with those closely impacted.

I have observed managers who openly weep, others who remain strong, some who go absent, and some who have a way of comforting that makes me think they should have thought about the clergy as a career. Knowing how you personally approach death and crises will help make you more effective should the situation ever arise.

My Hands-on Style

My style in a crisis is calm and hands-on. It is only after the initial incident has been stabilized that I react or grieve. For me, after finishing that unexpected morning of dealing with a crisis and communicating to many different groups of people, I needed some time for myself.

I drove around and cried in my car for a while. I felt like Holly Hunter's character in the 1987 movie *Broadcast News*, as she dealt deftly with every crisis in the newsroom and then, when alone, bawled while going through an entire box of tissues.

After that cathartic episode, I wanted to ground myself again by going to my daughters' school and stopping in their classrooms. I went home, kissed my husband, told him I loved him, and returned to work. For many days, we dealt with the family and coworkers, and for several weeks I helped the employee's spouse with paperwork. I often think of their family and their ability to move forward in life after experiencing such a devastating loss.

The grief and loss for the family, the city organization, and the coworkers leave a hole for a while. Eventually everyone makes peace and begins to fill the hole with positive memories and new experiences. This management experience and memory will stay with me. I hope I will not have to use this skill set again, but if I do, I will be better prepared. **PM**



KAREN DALY is assistant city manager, Sugar Land, Texas, and former city manager, Greenville, Texas (kdaly@sugarlandtx.gov).

Fund Accounting

Solutions

NEXT EXIT

Big City Bang for Small Town Bucks
CenterPoint Fund Accounting and Payroll
www.redwingsoftware.com 1-800-732-9464

CELEBRATING
30 YEARS
OF SERVICE
1979-2009