Leading in a Post-disaster Setting: Guidance for Human Resource Practitioners

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Abstract

Based on a qualitative study of four organisations involving 47 respondents following the extensive 2010 – 2011 earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand, this paper presents some guidance for human resource practitioners dealing with post-disaster recovery. A key issue is the need for the human resource function to reframe its practices in a post-disaster context, developing a specific focus on understanding and addressing changing employee needs, and monitoring the leadership behaviour of supervisors. This article highlights the importance of flexible organisational responses based around a set of key principles concerning communication and employee perceptions of company support.

Keywords: Human resources (HR), disaster, recovery, resilience

Introduction

Disasters present a major conundrum for organisations. Workers can experience significant losses and trauma which affect their ability to work, with morale and engagement potentially declining (Pearson and Clair 1998). Yet in the aftermath of a disaster, those workers are vitally needed to assist with business recovery. This tension between the personal needs of workers and the demands of organisations is a significant challenge, yet there is little guidance available for human resource practitioners who have to manage these situations (Byron & Peterson, 2002; Ferris, Hochwarter & Matherley, 2007; Goodman & Mann, 2008).

The city of Christchurch, New Zealand, experienced a major earthquake with loss of life and large scale damage; this was accompanied by an extended period of ongoing, traumatic and damaging seismic activity. The present study explored the experiences of management and workers in this situation, using in-depth interview data from 47 respondents across four organisations. We discovered that pre-planned emergency management procedures were of limited value, and instead organisations had to respond to the ongoing challenges through a process of adaptation and learning.

We identified a set of core principles needed to drive this adaptive change; these centred upon identifying and addressing changing employee needs and expectations. Van Heugten had also undertaken a grounded study with 43 managers and frontline workers, across a range of social services and other industries, identifying some similar and complementary findings. In this paper, we draw on our core principles, augmented with relevant findings from van Heugten's study, to present a framework for understanding and addressing the post-disaster needs of employees, and propose a series of suggestions for HR practitioners.

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Research into Disasters

Disasters propel organisations into a situation that is rapidly changing and uncertain, where their usual operating guidelines no longer apply. The organisational disaster literature has tended to focus on pre-disaster matters, emphasising the need for activities, such as identifying and minimising risks, and developing business continuity plans to prepare organisations for the disaster phase. The post-disaster stage, and particularly the longer term recovery processes, have, however, received less attention (Lettieri, Masella & Radaelli, 2009).

At the level of individual workers, people exposed to traumatic events can experience a range of negative psychological reactions (Byron & Peterson, 2002; De Salvo & Hyre, 2007; Ferris et al., 2007; Leon, Hyre, Ompad, Deslavo & Muntner, 2007). For employers, this has significant consequences. The immediate demands of post-disaster living can make workers more focussed on self-preservation while the psychological reactions adversely affect those workers' ability to perform their roles, and absenteeism can increase. These challenges occur at the very time that organisations most need their workers. While post-disaster support is a significant avenue for potentially mitigating the negative effects of a disaster, comparatively little research has been devoted to the organisational implications and post-disaster management of employees (Pearson & Clair, 1998; De Salvo & Hyre, 2007; Goodman & Mann, 2008).

The limited research does note a number of potential lines for action. Recent disasters illustrate the need for employers to monitor workers' stress and offer counselling (Norris, Friedman & Watson, 2002; De Salvo & Hyre, 2007; Leon et al., 2007). Other tangible types of assistance, such as housing, meals, and emergency supplies, may lessen employee stress, reduce absenteeism, and foster positive work-related attitudes (Sanchez, Korbin & Viscarra, 1995; Byron & Peterson, 2002). Employees may also have expectations that their companies will "step up to the plate" after a disaster (Byron & Peterson 2002: 906) while the perceived fairness of employer actions also influences workers' responses (Sanchez et al., 1995; Harvey & Haines, 2005). Together, these findings indicate a need to explore post-disaster HR management issues and this created the impetus for the current study.

Contextual Background

In September 2010, the city of Christchurch New Zealand experienced a magnitude 7.4 (Richter scale) earthquake. During the two year period that followed, the city experienced 12,000 seismic events, including 52 major events of magnitude 5 or above. The most powerful event in February 2011 caused 185 deaths and widespread damage. The prolonged nature of the recovery and the continuing aftershocks compounded this situation, with further damage and the forced relocation of many residents. Many left the city while mental health issues increased significantly among those who remained (Dorahy & Kannis-Dymand, 2012; Carville, 2013). This situation provided a rare opportunity to observe the nature of the interactions between management and employees following a major disaster.

Research Design

The study used a qualitative, grounded theory-based research design, utilising semi-structured interviews. A total of 47 interviews were conducted across four large organisations in Christchurch in the latter part of 2011. Respondents were asked to describe (a) their experiences during and subsequent to the February 2011 earthquake; (b) their subsequent experiences and needs, and (c) their experience of the nature of assistance and support they received from their managers and the organisation. Employee responses were coded using

NVivo software and these codes were combined to form themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldana, 2011)

Findings

The organisations offered a range of support services for their workers, from primary assistance such as food, water, showering and laundry, through to cash, counselling, and holidays. However, focussing on the specifics of the assistance given in this situation may be of limited value as those details may not be applicable in other types of disaster. Instead, the study sought to identify a more universal set of principles and dynamics that could generalise to a variety of situations.

The findings revealed four themes relating to employee needs and expectations, which we now outline, along with a series of applied issues for HR practitioners to consider. [1]

The Initial Phase: Physical Needs and Communication

The initial phase concerned the first 12 hours following the disaster. The needs in this period centred on physical and psychological safety, communication with partners and family, and necessities, such as food, shelter, and water. These are largely matters that require pre-disaster preparation.

Immediate priorities in many disasters are the evacuation of buildings and checking on employees. Evacuation plans typically involve fire-safety assembly points, however, these can be unsuitable for events such as seismic disasters if they are near buildings and exposed to falling debris during aftershocks. The Christchurch disaster involved collapsed buildings and long lists of missing persons, so HR staff needed emergency contact lists that were prepared in advance, updated, and readily accessible (Ferris et al., 2007; Mann, 2011):

> *The leader of that, if it's a branch or business unit, needs to account for all of their staff. Whether they're in at work or whether they're on leave or away for the day sick, they needed to get hold of those people. Some branches were coming through quite quickly with responses that everyone was safe and then others took us until well into the night.*

Organisations that were caught unprepared in the first quake learned from this experience and, subsequently, developed more disaster-ready measures, including having multiple copies of key information both on-site and off-site:

> *Every one of our team, and not just the exec management team...now carries a little thing called a go-pack in their car. I've got two. I've got one in the car here and one in the car at home. Which is hard copies of all the contact lists. Batteries go flat and computers you can't get your contact lists*

Following the disaster, larger organisations looked to develop systems for the future which would expedite the preliminary contact process, exploring options such as issuing staff with cards and an 0800 number so that, in a disaster, staff could text or ring in and report their status. After these preliminary checks, however, there is still a need for more detailed assessment of employees' status. We found that workers expected employer-initiated contact. Workers, who were away from the workplace at the time of the disaster, interpreted a lack of contact from the employer as demonstrating a lack of concern, and this perception shaped their perceptions of the organisation's responses.

Workers, who had to remain at work, had an intense need to communicate with family. Uncertainty about the safety of family members significantly influenced those workers' own emotional state and their ability to

concentrate on work. This need for communication also continued through the following months as the ongoing aftershocks meant that workers regularly needed to check the well-being of significant others. Employers had to create systems to permit such communication, as well as providing flexibility and allowing family needs to be addressed as a priority.

The basic, practical needs of water, food, and shelter were central. Severe damage to the infrastructure meant that supplies of water and food ceased, and organisations were dependent on whatever reserves they had. For essential-service organisations with staff working through the initial crisis period, a key lesson was the need to provide food for their employees:

> *The army figured out years ago troops can't fight on an empty stomach. We put a big kitchen in over here at the emergency op centre and a couple of big deep freezers with plenty of food in it. We now know when there is an emergency, somebody goes out and cooks up a storm and the troops eat.*

Although most Christchurch workers were able to access their homes after work, in other disasters, it may be difficult or impossible for workers to return to their homes. Preparing for this may require employers and workers to prepare stocks of clothing, shelter, food and supplies (Mowll & Wellington Lifelines Group, 2012).

Finally, as employees re-entered their workplaces, the need for a sense of safety became prominent. Safety measures, such as assessments to ensure the safety of buildings after major seismic jolts, and establishing clear procedures for aftershocks, significantly influenced workers' readiness to return. These issues also applied to other workers whose workplaces reopened in the following weeks. Where organisations failed to do this, either because they failed to recognise the importance of this issue for workers, or because they did not have arrangements to access suitable specialist services, this created long-lasting mistrust between management and employees.

In summary, for this phase of a disaster, the key human resources issues centre on ensuring that the organisation has:

a) pre-written and rehearsed evacuation plan
b) staff emergency contact lists that are up-to-date and readily accessible, both on-site and off-site, while maintaining confidentiality
c) pre-arranged systems to account for staff in the immediate post-disaster phase, contacting and checking on staff safety as well as having pre-disaster systems for recording staff and visitor movements
d) stocks of food, water and essential supplies
e) systems, including arrangements with engineers and other specialists, for ensuring the safety of workplaces before staff re-enter
f) accurate communications to staff on practical matters such as the safety of buildings.

Recovery: Managing Expectations and Maintaining Equity

There was wide variation in the ways and extent to which employees were affected by the disaster. Some people lost family members in the collapse of city buildings. Geographically, the east of the city was much more severely affected than the west, and even at the street-level, some houses suffered extensive damage while others were unaffected. Intra-personal differences further influenced how individuals reacted to the same situation (Byron & Peterson, 2002). Given this diversity, employees initially tended to see their own level of need in comparison to others. They assessed their condition relative to their colleagues, especially those most negatively affected, so tended to understate their own situation. Managers later discovered that

workers who lost their homes did not report this for several days, even when talking with managers, as those workers perceived that their situation was not as bad as that of others.

This influenced the employees' willingness to articulate their own needs and the extent to which they utilised the support services offered by the employer. In those early stages, although workers recognised the assistance that was available, they were reluctant to access this, believing that other people needed assistance before them. The crux, however, was that although many did not utilise the services themselves, they were aware that the support existed and they placed great value on knowing that support was offered, even though only a small proportion of staff utilised the specific supports.

To develop a more objective assessment of needs, some organisations created systems to identify and classify employees' situations:

> *We did a matrix sort of risk pattern of what's happened physically to them, mentally - is their house damaged, are their family okay. You know, so we were able to map that out quite quickly and that allowed us to know who were kind of on our high-risk radar and that we stayed very, very close to those people.*
>
> *That gave us a bit of a heads-up particularly to those staff that would be too potentially proud to come forward and say they needed something.*

The nature of the information to be gathered needed to be determined in advance; some organisations started the process and then later realised they omitted important issues. The assessment needed to be comprehensive, covering physical and psychological well-being of the employee, family, any extended family, as well as damage to housing, the availability of essential services, and other urgent needs:

> *We definitely could have done that piece better in hindsight. You know after the September one, we could have locked in some of those pieces better around what, in a crisis, would be the things that you need to ask if you were calling an individual because I felt we asked these ones, and then I thought, oh, we could have asked these questions. You know, it could have been two or three things that if we'd tagged them on, we would have got a much better picture.*

The workers' tendency to defer to the needs of others was confined to the very early stages though. As the city moved into longer term recovery, people became more conscious of their own pressing needs. Fairness and equity regarding support received became a contentious issue. Workers began to revise their views of their own situation, particularly their needs and the assistance they expected. People became very aware of the support that their friends, and even colleagues in the same organisation, were receiving. In the early disaster phase, public attention focussed on those people who had lost family members, and these people were perceived as having the greatest need. After that initial crisis however, attention and sympathy progressively moved through a variety of groups within the population. The focus shifted first to people who had lost their homes; after that, sympathy moved to those who were battling insurance companies, those needing major house repairs, and those who were not coping with the aftershocks. Each of these progressions encompassed a much larger number of people, and gradually the contrast between the affected group and other workers became less marked.

This created a dilemma for organisations that had assisted the most-affected employees in the initial period; how long should this level of support continue, and what assistance should be given to the other employees with their own disaster-related needs? Almost all employees needed 'stress days', time off to look after children, or time for dealing with agencies. Managers had attended to the immediate needs of the worst-affected employees but had not foreseen the more widespread, longer term needs that would emerge. They had to find sustainable ways to provide ongoing support for the most needy while also acknowledging the

needs of other employees. Staff and managers who were less dramatically affected began to exhibit less tolerance for others who were still dealing with practical and emotional post-disaster issues. While employees appreciated the concessions and support given, it was a challenge for organisations to avoid perceptions of inequity or favouritism, especially when the situation continued to unfold in ways that had not been anticipated.

An additional problem noted by van Heugten was that many workers, including managers and supervisors, who had coped well in the weeks and months following each of the major earthquakes, were extremely exhausted by late 2011. They had worked long hours and were coming to the end of their reserves, while media attention was shifting away from the needs of earthquake-affected Cantabrians. Exhaustion, and a growing sense of unfairness about their needs being neglected, led some to become more irritable, and decision making could be impaired. Front line workers in van Heugten's research, many of whom remained sensitive to the needs of others and prone to downward comparison (*"I am fortunate by comparison to..."*), attempted to shield their tired supervisors from workplace issues, including conflicts between staff, and resourcing problems. This could potentially lead to problem situations being left unattended until they became major and critical.

When organisational leaders continued to check on the wellbeing of all staff in a personal, but not intrusive, manner (Boullion, 2007), and when staff knew that support was needs-based, this knowledge moderated their perceptions of unfairness. This was especially so when managers did identify the needs of people who showed few visible signs of non-coping, and attended to these as a matter of importance. Several of van Heugten's participants also identified the helpfulness of post-disaster educational seminars. These seminars had raised awareness of the diverse types of psychological and behavioural responses to stress that could occur as well as the likelihood that conflicts might arise due to the differences in people's responses. This awareness enabled the workers to take a step back and reflect on unexpected reactions from colleagues, and to be more tolerant of those.

The key HR tasks to address in this regard are:

a) develop systems to thoroughly check on, and record the status of individual workers after the disaster, covering their own safety and well-being, other family members, and their homes

b) use methods, such as systems to identify and classify employees' situations, to avoid potential under-reporting in the initial stages

c) continue to monitor changes in employees' needs and perceptions; stay directly in touch with employees to gain their first-hand perceptions concerning the support-types that are of most value

d) from the outset, attempt to look at both the short-term, and potential long-term needs; create transparent and equitable systems that can both assist the most needy as well supporting larger numbers of employees in the longer term

e) provide indications of how long assistance can be expected to continue (while reserving the managerial right to extend this, if appropriate)

f) be ready to manage the tension that can exist between assisting severely affected employees and others who may have lesser degrees of direct disaster-related harm

g) avoid assuming that workers who have coped well initially will continue to do so, and ensure that support is seen to be based on needs. When employees are generally aware that support is needs-based, they are less likely to perceive company actions as being unfair

h) provide education, including information about the benefits of restorative relaxation and time-out for all staff before exhaustion levels become critical. Encourage managers and supervisors to set examples around self-care.

Recovery: Monitoring Changing Needs

The nature of employees' needs also evolved as the situation progressed from the initial disaster response into longer term recovery. In the first days after the disaster, employees' needs included very tangible provisions, such as food and water, ablutions, laundry, house-repairs and accommodation:

> *We put washing machines in here and…the practicalities of life that people needed – water, shower facilities, and I could be here at 7 o'clock at night and people would bring their families in and they would all have showers. The reality was it was just at such a basic level so there was no need to go and do a whole load. I think we pitched it right. It was that we were pitching it in the right space for basic needs*

At work, in those early days after the disaster, there was a high level of energy with employees often wanting to assist and feel they were contributing to the recovery, or to provide a sense of normality among the chaos. Levels of engagement were high:

> *The boys didn't go home until they worked out how they could operate without that particular building. They're just focussed, highly engaged, resilient, almost driven by the challenge like call to action, heroism. Man, a high performing team.*

Van Heugten found that employees returning to work valued opportunities for colleagues to spend social time together. Shared morning teas, lunches, or barbeques provided important opportunities for workers to catch up, debrief, and provide social support. Informal gatherings also helped people, who had been relocated due to damaged workplaces, get to know the other workers with whom they often had to share cramped accommodation.

Communication of information continued to be a key priority. Van Heugten found workers valued personalised inquiries into their needs from their immediate managers or supervisors. Amidst the ongoing aftershocks, workers required regular updates on the safety of premises. They wanted to know their employers' expectations and allowances around work readiness, and needed reassurances about pay. Workers generally accepted that this practical information could be delivered through generic company-wide or divisional communications. However, frontline workers and managers noted that, unless the people making these communications were located within the disaster zone, information was often out of date or inaccurate, or lacking in sensitivity to the emotional impact of local happenings.

As the city moved into the long-haul of recovery, the situation changed. In the initial post-disaster phase, needs could be addressed in practical ways; however, as the recovery progressed the needs became more subtle, with new pressures creating more stress. Workers confronted demands, such as caring for themselves and extended family, living long-term in badly damaged homes and neighbourhoods, and job-losses among family members. Prolonged and acrimonious negotiations with insurers were time-consuming and stressful, and could be accompanied by the need to find alternative accommodation during repairs. In some cases, people were required to permanently relocate. Throughout this, there was a pervasive uncertainty regarding their future (Sanchez et al., 1995).

The disaster also produced increased demands at work. The initial zeal faded and many employees experienced higher than normal workload, working extra hours with fewer resources. In some sectors, certain sites experienced vastly increased work volumes while others had less change. When companies did not monitor this and act to redistribute the work, it produced both exhaustion and a sense of injustice among workers.

Workers involved in the immediate rebuild efforts, including emergency services, demolition crews, local authority staff, infrastructure workers and trades people, were vulnerable to burnout and work engagement began to decline (Quarantelli, 1988). In service industries, there were added pressures from dealing with heightened customer stress levels. Van Heugten found that where the nature of the work allowed, options such as varying or rotating work tasks, and providing regular opportunities for frontline workers to move "backstage" for breaks, could be effective in helping workers manage these demands.

It was a challenging task for organisations to gauge the evolving needs of employees; there was considerable variation in the extent to which they achieved this and were in touch with the actual needs. The most effective organisations maintained some direct, two-way links between senior management and employees. Van Heugten noted that communications from management to workers now needed to take account of increasing employee weariness and wariness. Workers became critical of generalised messages of sympathy and thanks that were emailed to all staff, dismissing these as platitudes that showed a lack of genuine concern for workers' ongoing plight. Workers could mistrust the motives for those communications, especially if they occurred when management were implementing top-down changes with little consultation.

Managers wrestled with the tension between meeting business demands while continuing to accommodate workers' needs. They were not sure when their organisations should resume 'business-as-usual':

> *We're in the long-run game, that's when it's really going to get a bit tougher when you're starting to manage additional workloads because you've got [case-types] coming through and red zone houses and insurance queries. You know, layer on layer of issues and you're asking staff to do more, things are taking more time to get things done.*

Some managers were accommodating, allowing people to recover at their own rate. Others, however, became keen to shift the attention back to business performance. Eight months after the earthquake, a proportion of managers believed that the situation was returning to 'normal'. Workers did not share this view and suggested that those managers were overlooking their ongoing needs and well-being, particularly in the long-term recovery. Although the organisations offered a lot of assistance immediately during and after the disaster, workers felt their subsequent, less obvious needs were overlooked:

> *I think people have been stoic and got through this to a point but actually there's not much on the surface before you scratch below and actually get into some people with some real mental health issues.*

Providing assistance for employees to address outside-of-work demands on its own did not necessarily address the overall situation confronting employees. For example, giving employees time off to deal with disaster-related issues could compound work problems when this was not linked with managing work demands, and there was need for a more comprehensive package for managing the employees' situation. Staff, who were allowed time to deal with matters such as housing and insurance, returned to find that their work had not been dealt with in their absence and this exacerbated matters.

In some essential-services organisations where staff worked rostered hours and had difficulty accessing external services, their companies appointed coordinators who helped employees link with the range of agencies and post-disaster services, and even arranged for those agencies to visit the workplaces.

Although it was difficult to balance the increased work and home demands, it was not inevitable that the combination would lead to increased dissatisfaction. Hochwarter, Laird and Brouer (2008) collected data from five studies following hurricanes in the United States of America, and concluded that, even when work demands are particularly high in the aftermath of disasters, workers can gain an increased sense of satisfaction from meeting these as long as they are adequately resourced for doing so. They found that, in

addition to requiring adequate practical resources, workers are better able and more inclined to rise to the challenge of meeting high demands if they are afforded a degree of control over the organisation of work, and flexibility around matching workplace and personal needs (van Heugten, in press).

In this phase, management's role involves attending to evolving employee needs, and key actions include:

a) creating opportunities to enable workers to spend time together to reacquaint themselves with team members, debrief, and offer mutual social support
b) providing timely and appropriate communications on practical matters, as well as avenues for staff to ask questions about matters that concern them
c) establishing systems to continue monitoring individual employees' changing needs as the recovery progresses
d) where possible, gathering the information directly from the employees themselves
e) using this information to determine the types of assistance that is most needed, gathering feedback on its effectiveness, and being prepared to keep on revising this
f) constantly monitoring workloads, acknowledging the extra pressure and, where possible, acting to redistribute uneven workloads
g) developing holistic plans regarding workloads, taking into account both work and outside-of-work aspects
h) considering provisions that will facilitate employees' access to support agencies; encouraging employee participation in decision making and planning.

The Leadership Behaviour of Supervisors

In several organisations, the senior managers focussed the organisation's attention on addressing the workers' well-being through both their instructions and their actions. Those managers explicitly directed their leadership teams to attend to employees' needs, doing everything the company could, and calling on all the resources the company had in order to assist staff who were in need. They also set a very clear example through their own actions, for example, going out and delivering assistance:

> *We had food, food parcels and things like that. We had water, so we were out and about to actually sense and feel what was going on. You know, how they were coping. It was that immediacy of you'd walk in and they'd give you big hugs. It was like that connection. It wasn't like you were the boss coming in to see how they were going.*

The frontline workers did not always feel this level of support though. Their main contact with management was through their immediate supervisor, and the way that supervisor treated them shaped their impression of the organisation's support. The immediate supervisor held a pivotal position. Senior management trusted the supervisors to communicate their concern for the workers, to provide emotional support to workers, and also inform workers of the support that was available. Supervisors were also relied upon for assessing individuals' needs, reporting back to senior management about the situation of workers and their needs. Some performed these roles well but others were much less effective. In some parts of an organisation, supervisors failed to inform employees of the support available, and this caused employees in those areas to feel as if they were being unfairly treated compared to other workers, creating stress and dissatisfaction. Supervisors could also have lower levels of interpersonal skills; they lacked ability in recognising individuals' needs, acknowledging the stress affecting workers, communicating their understanding, or offering flexibility in the work.

The managers themselves identified the need for empathy and emotional intelligence as attributes that they had to cultivate during the disaster:

> *The thing that I think you learn through that is that it gives you a new level of compassion for your people because you think you're compassionate as a leader to start with but, actually it's so very different when you're in a situation where you're in destruction mode and you know you're just trying to manage through.*

Senior management had to create organisation-wide support provisions that were transparent and equitable. When an immediate supervisor understood the intent of those provisions and implemented them in a compassionate but fair manner, employees felt supported and fairly treated by the organisation. Conversely, when supervisors were unsympathetic and seemingly unfair in their responses, the workers formed a negative evaluation of the overall organisation. The emotional intelligence of supervisors, shown in their awareness of workers' well-being and their ability to be supportive, empathetic and fair was a significant influence on how workers perceived the organisation's support (Boyatzis, Goleman & Rhee, 2000).

Although supervisors' emotional intelligence is often viewed as a personal trait, van Heugten found that the context also affected the ability to empathise, with supervisors and managers who had worked to exhaustion becoming less able to offer empathy and support. Managers and supervisors could also find it extremely difficult to declare their needs because this could lead to loss of face. Normalising the need for time out, and insisting that all staff at all levels benefit from downtime and respite, even if they might be inclined to dismiss their personal need for that, is a key preventive measure against burnout (Hochwarter et al., 2008).

The following key guidelines can assist in promoting appropriate leadership behaviours:

a) educate senior management and supervisors regarding the changing nature of workers' post-disaster needs, and the necessity of keeping employee well-being as a central focus throughout all phases of disaster recovery

b) ensure that senior management know how to provide clear leadership during a disaster, articulating a set of values that strongly emphasise acknowledging and supporting employees as well as modelling appropriate ways of acting; this could include having direct contact with frontline workers so that employees can see these behaviours and supervisors can follow their example

c) as part of pre-disaster preparation, assess the competencies and behaviours of supervisors with regard to their leadership and emotional intelligence; coach and train them in this regard and consider making it a central part of their performance criteria, then when a disaster does occur those abilities will be a vital part of the organisation's recovery

d) monitor the performance of supervisors during a disaster, gathering independent evaluations of what is happening across the various sections within the organisation; this should include gathering some information directly from the employees themselves

e) ensure that managers and supervisors are able to have suitable rest and support for their own needs.

Conclusion

Under normal circumstances, HR managers can utilise well-established policies and procedures. In a post-disaster context, however, those procedures may no longer be appropriate and, instead, managers are challenged to find new ways to address worker needs. A range of types of assistance are required as disaster recovery progresses, ranging from help accessing tangible resources that meet primary needs, such as food, water, housing, laundry, and childcare – through to psychosocial assistance, including counselling, and access to social service agencies, and social support via informal gatherings, and opportunities for relaxation and fun (Sanchez et al., 1995). Workers' needs vary between individuals, and change over time.

The HR function needs to be sensitive to this evolving pattern of needs in order to assist in organisational recovery. The extent to which workers perceive the organisation's actions as appropriate shapes workers' evaluations of the organisation; irrelevant or inadequate supports are likely to be viewed as failings or lack

of concern on the part of the employer. This includes the major challenge of ensuring that workers view the decision processes for allocating resources and assistance as fair and equitable. Accompanying this is the need for emotional awareness among supervisors and middle managers, including their ability to convey empathy and support as well as their ability to recognise and respond to practical and emotional needs (Bies & Moag, 1986). When a supervisor exhibits higher levels of such emotional awareness, employees are likely to perceive greater organisational support. These principles are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Key principles and their Implications in a Post-Disaster Context

Principle	Issues	Implications
Physical needs and communication	Physical and psychological safety, communication with family, necessities (food, shelter, and water).	Evacuation, accounting for/contacting staff, contact with families, safety, essential supplies
Recovery: monitoring changing needs	Identifying immediate and evolving needs, from tangible matters (e.g. essential supplies, housing, laundry, and childcare) as well as social support, (e.g. counselling, and access to agencies)	Ongoing monitoring to identify changing employee needs, and supply assistance that matches those needs Feedback from employees
Recovery: managing expectations and maintaining equity	The equity and fairness of the processes for allocating assistance	Short and long-term post-disaster planning to address current needs anticipate emerging needs Devise assistance measures that are seen as fair and equitable Ensure that assistance is sustainable and remains equitable across employees
Leadership behaviour of supervisors	The emotional awareness of supervisors and middle managers, including their ability to empathise, convey empathy and support, recognise and respond to practical and emotional needs	Emotional awareness and competency of supervisors and middle managers Pre-disaster training and evaluation Post-disaster monitoring of supervisors

If organisations fail in these types of areas, workers will view the organisation negatively, seeing it as uncaring and unsupportive. Employee perceptions of organisational support significantly affect work engagement. In a disaster, this takes on new prominence with employees experiencing new, heightened levels of need, which makes them acutely aware of organisations' responses. If workers believe they are supported, then they are more likely to be productive, committed, willing to engage in organisational citizenship behaviours, and less likely to quit (Harvey & Haines, 2005; Saks, 2006; Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). In a disaster, this can assist the recovery of the organisation.

The findings from this study highlight the need for the HR function to adapt in a disaster, so as to foster a prompt and sustainable recovery for individuals and the organisation. Applying the set of principles and guidelines outlined in this paper allows the HR function to remain flexible and adaptive, mitigating the harmful effects of the disaster.

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Notes

[1] These themes are drawn from the settings observed in our study along with van Heugten's findings, however, they do not purport to be exhaustive guidelines. The application of the themes may also vary across industries.