

MILITARY LEADERSHIP IN STRESSFUL SITUATIONS

Leadership during stressful situations is a challenging task. It requires leaders to manage large quantities of evolving information during increased operational tempo. Leaders must also communicate effectively with people that are being pushed to their limits. Understanding principles for managing stressful and traumatic situations helps leaders to be more effective. When bad things happen, leaders can help their people by understanding how to acknowledge and support the normal grief that occurs. Throughout stressful situations, leaders must also manage their own well-being to ultimately ensure operational effectiveness.

This document provides an overview of important aspects of leading during stressful situations, including: effective communication, early interventions, supporting grief, and managing stress.

Communication

Effective communication is essential during stressful events and reduces personnel distress, builds rapport, enhances functioning, and improves operational success. Leaders who communicate effectively spend 90% of the time listening and 10% talking. On the other hand, poor or absent communication increases the likelihood of rumors, damages trust, reduces credibility, and injures morale. The following principles can help a leader to communicate effectively about stressful situations:

- Anticipate potential stressors and plan what you will say in advance.
- Provide information promptly after a stressful incident.
- Give only truthful information; say what you know and what you don't know.
- When more information is needed, commit to following up and then do so.
- Tell people when to expect updates and provide them in a timely manner; sometimes even telling people there is no new information is helpful.

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- Ask your people how they are doing and listen to what they say without interrupting.
- Respond empathically and without judgment or criticism.
- Reassure people that it is okay to have their feelings and you are there to help.
- Stay calm when people are angry; when redirecting someone, be firm but keep your cool.

Early Interventions

Following a stressful situation, leaders can help their people by using established early interventions. These principles, often called Psychological First Aid (PFA), are designed to be used by everyone, not just healthcare providers. PFA focuses on establishing a sense of safety, helping people feel calm, creating hope or optimism, connecting with others, and encouraging self-reliance. Below are ways in which a leader can use early interventions to support their personnel after a stressful situation:

- Help people ensure they meet basic needs for food, water, and rest.
- Listen when people want to share their stories and emotions; remember there is no right way to feel.
- Be friendly and compassionate even when people are being difficult.
- Assist people to stay in touch with co-workers, friends, and family.
- Give practical suggestions to steer people toward helping themselves.
- Engage people in meeting their own needs.
- Remind people you and others are there to help.
- Support personnel in accessing others services (financial, chaplain, mental health, etc).
- Don't force people to talk about their stories.

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- Avoid simple reassurances like “everything will be okay” or “it’s not that bad”.
- Don’t tell people what you think they should feel, think, or do, or how they should have reacted.
- Don’t tell people why you think they are hurting or suffering.
- Don’t make promises you can’t keep.
- Don’t criticize support services or higher level leadership.

Grief

Leaders play a critical role in helping people recover after a stressful situation, particularly after bad or undesirable outcomes. Understanding how people react to stressful or tragic events is critical to effective leadership. Early grief can include: waves of sadness, irritability, intrusive images of stressful events, social isolation, and avoiding things that remind people of the stressful event. For some, grief may be delayed and, for others, it may not be evident. Remember that people process information differently in stressful situations. As a result, effective communication (discussed earlier) is an important part of helping people manage grief. Below are additional steps a leader can take to help people manage grief:

- Be visible to your personnel and speak in public locations.
- Give accurate and timely information.
- Keep messages simple and repeat them frequently.
- Speak calmly and encourage working together.
- Know the status of existing and available resources.
- Provide policy guidance without micromanagement.
- Create or support the use of rituals and symbolic activities that help personnel grieve.
- Attend and support personnel attendance at memorials to assist with healing; allow yourself to experience any grief you have.
- Provide common goals for direction.
- Avoid blaming others; this can enhance anger and stigma.

Stress Management

In order for leaders to take care of others, they must first take care of themselves. In other words, reducing stress

in others requires leading by example. Because leadership is critical to ensure organized and efficient work, high stress situations require special measures for leaders to deal with their own stress. It can be difficult for a leader to predict how any given stressful situation will impact them, but the following plan can help minimize difficulties:

- Establish a work-rest cycle for yourself and follow it.
- Ensure you have a rest area with fluids and food.
- Drink and eat on a regular schedule; ensure you stay hydrated.
- Get off your feet during breaks.
- Provide a minimum of 4 hours of sleep during each 24 hour period; 7-8 hours is more ideal.
- Return home for food and rest whenever possible.
- Avoid alcohol and tobacco use as much as possible.
- Limit caffeine use because it can increase stress, worsen sleep, and dehydrate you.
- Identify a trusted co-worker who can evaluate your effectiveness and consult with them daily.
- Communicate clearly in an optimistic manner, but identify mistakes for yourself and others and correct them.
- Compliments can serve as powerful motivators and reduce stress of your personnel.

Effective leadership during stressful events results from preparation and implementation of important principles. Communication, early interventions through PFA, supporting grief, and personal stress management for leaders increase operational effectiveness and opportunity for mission success.

Additional Resources

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress fact sheets
<https://www.cstsonline.org/fact-sheet-menu/fact-sheet-search>
 Leadership Communication: Anticipating and Responding to Stressful Situations
 Psychological First Aid
 Grief Leadership: Leadership in the Wake of Tragedy
 Leadership Stress Management



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