

Leading With Empathy During Times of Crisis

**A practical guide for supporting employees
when the world feels heavy**

Crises impact more than headlines—they impact people. When your employees are navigating fear, grief, uncertainty, or exhaustion, it affects their wellbeing, focus, and sense of belonging at work. This resource offers a clear, empathetic approach to responding in moments that matter most.

Leading With Humanity & Understanding: Why Response Matters

Empathy in leadership means acknowledging impact, responding with clarity, and acting with accountability.

Crises don't happen in isolation, and neither do their impacts. Employees are impacted by crises in different ways:

- Some are directly affected through geography, family, or community ties
- Certain communities experience indirect harm through media exposure, identity-based fear, or collective grief
- For others, these events compound existing stressors already present in their daily lives
- Many, particularly those from historically underrepresented or marginalized groups, may experience heightened emotional, psychological, or safety concerns during these moments

Even when events occur outside the workplace, their impact does not.

Psychological trauma—whether direct or indirect—can affect both people and performance. Crisis-related stress often shows up at work before it is verbalized. During these moments, teammates may experience:

- Increased absenteeism
- Presenteeism (being physically present but mentally or emotionally distracted)
- Reduced quality of work
- Lower productivity
- Difficulty concentrating
- Disengagement or withdrawal
- Emotional fatigue

When leaders ignore or mishandle these moments, trust erodes. When leaders respond with empathy, clarity, and care, psychological safety strengthens.

This guide is designed to help business and HR leaders define their crisis response approach with clarity, care, and consistency—centering employee wellbeing while balancing business realities.

Guiding Principles for Responding With Care & Intention

When grounding your response to crises with care and intention, use these four guiding principles to inform how you lead, communicate and support your employees.

Prioritize People

In moments of crisis, prioritize your people and their well-being as humans over their productivity.

Be Proactive

Acknowledge the situation early on and provide updates often. Don't wait for employees to ask for help or support.

Recognize Nuance

Recognize these events impact different groups in different ways. Ensure those most affected feel seen, heard, and supported.

Be Transparent

Be honest about what you know, what you don't know, and how you can support your team. You don't have to have all the answers.

The Leading With Empathy Crisis Response Flow

A Six-Step Approach for Navigating Moments of Crisis

Not every crisis requires a public statement, but every crisis does require a thoughtful approach. This framework is designed to help leaders assess impact, respond intentionally, and support employees thoughtfully.

1) Detect & Triage

Identify the type of crisis and assess the immediate risks.

2) Assess Impact

Understand how employees and operations may be affected.

3) Determine Response

Decide what, if anything the company will say and/or do.

4) Enable Leaders

Ensure leaders and managers have the clarity, guidance, and tools to respond with care.

5) Activate Support

Translate care into concrete action through resources, flexibility, and guidance.

6) Evaluate & Refine

Implement your approach, assess impact, and adjust as needed.

Step 1: Detect & Triage

Identify the type of crisis and assess immediate risk.

Start by understanding what is happening and how it may impact your people and your organization.

Public Health & Safety

Events that pose a direct threat to physical safety or health (e.g., Pandemics, mass violence, terrorism-related incidents, public safety emergencies, etc.)

Natural Disasters

Environmentally driven disruptions affecting regions or infrastructure (e.g., Hurricanes, floods, wildfires, severe storms, extreme weather, etc.)

Geopolitical or Identity -Targeted

Events that impact communities based on dimensions of identity or political conflict (e.g., War, hate crimes, police brutality, attacks on civil rights, etc.)

Organizational

Events directly affecting your company, sector, or ecosystem (e.g., Data breaches, layoffs, supply chain disruptions, industry-wide crisis, etc.)

Immediate triage questions:

- Is there an immediate safety risk to employees? Is there confirmed loss of life or serious harm?
- Are employees, locations, or business operations directly impacted?
- Is there potential legal, safety, or reputation risk?
- Is immediate communication required?

If “yes” to any of the above, immediately engage the appropriate internal partners to determine next steps and your course of action. Step 2 on the next page will help you further assess impact.

Step 2: Assess Employee and Business Impact

Having an objective set of criteria and a scoring rubric creates clarity and mitigates silence of overreaction. Use the scorecard below to guide your decision making.

Employee Impact (0-3)

- 3 — Employees directly impacted
- 2 — High indirect or identity-based impact
- 1 — Limited indirect exposure
- 0 — No known impact

Identity-Targeted Harm (0-3)

- 3 — Event targets or disproportionately impacts a specific community
- 2 — Event heightens fear or polarization
- 1 — General crisis
- 0 — Not applicable

Business / Operational Risk (0-3)

- 3 — Major disruption to operations, customers supply chain/partners or safety concern
- 2 — Moderate disruption or safety concern
- 1 — Minor disruption or safety concern
- 0 — No known disruption or safety concern

Geographic Scope (0-3)

- 3 — Event affect is global, affects multiple countries or has nationwide impacts
- 2 — Event affects a specific state or region
- 1 — Event is confined to a single city, office or local community
- 0 — Minimal geographic reach

Step 3: Determine Response Level

Let impact drive the response based on the total score from the section above.

0-3 | Monitor

- Quietly assess
- Equip managers
- Prepare in case support is needed
- No company-wide communication or external action

7-9 | Organizational Support

- Organization-wide acknowledgment
- Targeted outreach to impacted communities
- Clear support resources and flexibility
- Assess the need for external communication and action based on company values, organizational impact, and commitments

4-6 | Manager-Led Support

- Provide managers with guidance and flexibility norms
- Share resources through leader channels
- No company-wide communication or external action

10-12 | Enterprise-Level Response

- Coordinated executive-level communication internally and externally rooted in clear articulation of company action(s), not just sentiment
- Expanded mental health and safety support
- Ongoing follow-up and care

Silence can be interpreted as indifference. Overreaction can feel performative. Empathy sits in the middle—intentional, measured, human.

Step 4: Enable Managers & Leaders

Prepare leaders to respond with clarity, empathy, and consistency.

Managers are often the first point of contact during moments of crisis. They need guidance, not guesswork.

Enable leaders by providing:

- Clear context on what the organization is assessing or doing
- Guidance on how to acknowledge the moment with care
- Talking points or suggested language
- Reinforcement of flexibility expectations
- Guardrails for respectful dialogue

Here are a few tips to ensure your comms to managers are effective:

- Acknowledge the moment without over-speculating
- Express care and concern for them, encouraging them to take care of themselves as they support their teams during this challenging time
- Provide a clear list of available support options
- Reaffirm expectations for respectful workplace behavior, especially during difficult or potentially polarizing events

What to avoid:

- Debating the legitimacy of harm
- Centering the organization, productivity, revenue, or profit over people
- Forcing emotional disclosure
- Over-explaining

When leaders are equipped, responses and support feel genuine and consistent, not reactive.

Here is practical guidance for leaders communicating with their teams or in 1:1 conversations.

Do

- Acknowledge the moment briefly and authentically
- Offer flexibility where possible
- Reinforce available support resources
- Create space for optional 1:1 check-ins
- Model calm and steadiness

Don't

- Minimize or dismiss the impact
- Force group processing conversations
- Share unverified information
- Center your personal opinions
- Ignore the moment entirely

Step 5: Activate Support

Translate care into visible, coordinated, and meaningful action.

Once leaders are enabled, the organization must respond clearly and consistently. This is where empathy shifts from language to active leadership.

Organizational Communication Should Include:

- Acknowledgment of the event and recognition that it may impact employees in different ways
- Clarity on what the organization is assessing or monitoring and how decisions are being made
- Specific actions the company is taking to support employees
- Available resources and flexibility options
- Reinforcement of respectful workplace expectations, especially during difficult or potentially polarizing events
- When appropriate, clarity on any external statement, public position or action the company is taking

Support in Practice May include:

- Flexible schedules and workload adjustments
- Clear permission for managers to prioritize wellbeing
- Mental health and wellbeing resources (EAP, counseling, etc.)
- Optional listening sessions, facilitated conversation(s) or spaces for reflection
- Targeted outreach and check-ins with impacted teams or communities
- Safety or operational updates if relevant
- Financial or community support aligned with company commitments and values

External Communication Best Practices (if applicable):

- Ensure employees are informed first (or at minimum, simultaneously)
- Align statements with company values and commitments
- Communicate concrete actions the company is taking, not just sentiment
- Avoid speculation or sharing unverified information
- Ensure internal and external messaging are consistent
- Be clear about what the organization can and cannot do

Step 6: Evaluate & Refine

Measure impact and adjust with intention.

Crisis response is not a one-time message, it's an ongoing process that requires reflection and refinement based on key learnings. Use the guidance below to assess impact, identify gaps, and strengthen future responses.

Within 48 Hours:

- Confirm leaders are applying guidance consistently
- Get feedback from HR partners/managers
- Identify concerns or unintended gaps

Within 1-2 Weeks

- Reassess employee needs and engagement
- Adjust support where necessary
- Capture lessons learned to strengthen and refine your approach and future responses

Governance & Accountability

Crisis response is a shared responsibility.

No single function should carry crisis response alone. Effective responses require coordination, clarity, and shared accountability across the organization.

Consider the following to determine ownership, roles and responsibilities. Tailor your approach based on your company's size, structure, and operating model.

1) Type of Impact

- Employee wellbeing impact → HR / People
- Reputational or public messaging impact → Communications
- Legal or regulatory risk → Legal
- Operational or safety disruption → Operations / Security

2) Severity of the Event

- Lower impact → Functional lead may manage response
- Moderate impact → Cross-functional coordination required
- Significant impact → Executive oversight and visibility

3) Org Structure

- Smaller organizations may centralize ownership across fewer leaders
- Larger organizations may activate a cross-functional response team

The structure below outlines example roles and ownership considerations.

HR / People

- Lead employee support, internal coordination, and manager enablement
- Assess workforce impact and guide flexibility and wellbeing resources

Communications

- Craft and deliver internal messaging
- Align internal and external communications when applicable

Legal

- Provide risk assessment and guardrails
- Ensure compliance and mitigate potential exposure

Executive Leadership

- Set tone, reinforce organizational values, and provide visibility when appropriate

Managers

- Deliver care where it matters most, day to day
- Apply flexibility, model steadiness, and support their teams directly

ERGs (Employee Resource Groups)

- Offer insight into community impact and employee sentiment
- Provide perspective and feedback to inform the response, not carry it alone

Clear ownership reduces confusion, accelerates decision-making, and ensures consistent messaging. When roles are clear, responses feel aligned and intentional.

Leading with empathy is not about having the perfect words.

It's about:

- Having a defined crisis response framework rooted in care
- Recognizing that employees are human first
- Responding with intention rather than fear
- Creating space for care without compromising clarity

In moments of crisis, how leaders respond becomes part of the culture.

If you're looking to build or strengthen your crisis response approach, we'd be glad to partner with you to design a thoughtful, values-aligned framework tailored to your organization.

[Contact Us](#)