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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Radiology Nursing

journal homepage: www.sciencedirect.com/journal/journal-of-radiology-nursing



Hot Topics

Leadership Essentials During a Disaster



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Leaders are those who use advanced skills such as communication, organizational, problem-solving, analytical, and interpersonal abilities to influence the actions of others. During a disaster event, it is essential for leaders to set the tone for their team and reach the highest levels of performance possible by all involved (Slepski, Couig, Lavin, Orsega, Goodwin-Veenema, 2019).

Disasters are unexpected events which occur, sometimes without warning, and demand those involved to change their normal daily activities to an immediate and focused response to the event. Organizations practice disaster management through periodic drills, and drill debriefing in attempt to improve their disaster plans. A best practice is to have a “backup plan” as no two disaster responses will ever be the same (Reynolds & Knox, 2019). Some of the most helpful advice to use during the creation of a disaster management plan is to learn from those who have experienced first-hand, a disaster (Gray, 2006). When an actual disaster occurs, the team will depend on their leaders for guidance throughout the entire event and the recovery from that event. Key points and considerations for those in charge during a disaster include the following:

Leadership

- Be visible to their teams to maintain a calm, organized manner that offers hope, answers questions, and continually works to reduce staff anxiety (Bluth, Kay, Smetherman, DeVun, Eick, Matthews, Sullican 2007).
- Ensure staff have the tools they need to perform proficiently on the front line including resources, supplies, policies, assistance with problem solving as well as visible leadership support.
- Establish security measures to protect staff, customers, and guard against theft.
- Self-care is essential for leaders who will be working long days and long stretches of days in a row. Maintain proper habits including healthy diet, exercise, sleep hygiene, and mental health support.
- Maintain regular daily business must continue while also dealing with the disaster.
 - Continue to process accurate payroll;
 - Follow up on serious safety events;

- Monitor safe handling of medications and controlled substances;
- Pay close attention to the budget as any disaster is going to test the economic stability of the organization.
- Conduct daily leadership meetings to maintain up-to-date communication with team, and establish plans for issues that are developing (Aarne Grossman, 2020).
- Be ready for the unexpected and respond in a calm, organized manner.
 - Have a plan B, plan C, and plan D ready.
- Keep your responses simple and to the point. Do not over complicate any issue.
 - Do not lie, justify, collude, or argue with people (Wakeman, 2010);
 - Acknowledge that you are scared too: lead with calm, strength, humor, compassion, and hope.
- Maintain personal resiliency as this is essential for the success of every leader.
- Remain objective in your perception of others, avoid judging others negatively unless redirection is needed.
- Be creative in your problem solutions, try new methods, use the information available at the time to make the best decision possible.
- Recognize that you are always on stage: Role model respect, portray calm and empathy for all others.

Plans

- Update policies in real time and post for staff to access easily. Process changes occur quickly during disasters, and staff need to have one place to look for the “current correct policy”.
- Update telephone lists (including names and titles) for contacting staff, leadership, community resources, etc.
- When responsive movement must occur, provide for safe transfers, evacuations, shelter in place, assign roles and duties, clear communication, etc.
- Manage resources, especially supply chain. Know what you are using, know what you need, and figure out how to obtain more.
- Work with governmental agencies to create the best response plan (i.e. FDA, licensing boards, CDC, FEMA, etc.)

Communication

- Be open, honest, transparent, and frequent to stay ahead of the rumors which can destroy staff moral very quickly (Jones, Thompson, Schetter, Silver 2017).

The author has no relevant disclosures. There was no grant funding or financial support for this manuscript.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jradnu.2020.04.006>

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- Send out a nightly email recapping the events of the day and portray hopefulness during difficult times (This is done by a senior administrator, e.g. chief nursing officer or chief executive officer, when the disaster and/or recovery is expected to be prolonged).
- Hold regular town hall meetings with remote capability for staff to hear from leadership and be involved in a forum with questions and answers.
- Monitor the media and how it may influence your organization.
- Increase those available in the patient services areas to meet the needs of patients, families, and the community.

Encouragement and morale

- Be sensitive to the personal needs of the team members who are providing the professional work for the organization but also the personal situations they may have at home (elder care, child-care, loss of living arrangements, etc.)
- Be understanding and proactive when employees who are tired and scared become disgruntled and display negative behaviors. Redirect them, offer strategies and hope.
- Provide internal communications that assist in maintaining morale.
 - Publicize employee assistance programs or mental health hotlines for staff to access 24/7;
 - Promote daily *Hope Huddles* where staff share success stories experienced during the disaster (Fawcett, 2020).
- Pay close attention every day, to the welfare of your front line staff and to your leadership team. Respond with encouragement, education, transparency, food, understanding, and situational updates. For disasters that are prolonged, do not become blind to the ongoing needs of your teams (Ellison, Gamble, 2020).

Leadership during a crisis of any type will require careful consideration for every decision that is to be made. Keeping focus

on the organization's mission and vision (Garry, 2020) is key to preserving the stamina necessary to lead during the event and during the recovery from the disaster.

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