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Plan for disaster before it's too late

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
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After the Al Ghantoot traffic pile-up, two further, major incidents at Al Quoz and at the Naif Souq in Deira - underline the need for adequate emergency procedures.

These incidents highlight the importance for companies and organisations to have a business continuity plan in place, to return to normal operation as early as possible. Waiting until after the incident, is way too late. Every employee needs to know exactly what procedure to follow during and after any emergency.

Resuming effective operation after an incident, is known as continuity planning which largely concerns immediate action on the logistical side - organising alternative space, restoring communications, and saving IT systems, especially data backup. These are the aspects that people may naturally think about first. However, the human dimension is equally as important.

There may be a skills gap in the organisation to manage such situations effectively and if this is the case, both HR and management will need to be trained in the techniques of defusing a crisis and how to manage the effects of post-trauma.

Anyone employed by the company, from the CEO down to the latest recruit can experience the effects of post-trauma stress or other negative reaction after being involved in, or witnessing, a critical incident. No-one is exempt.

Who does what?

There is no substitute for a well-rehearsed routine to ensure that continuity planning is implemented immediately, with managers feeling that they are handling the situation in a spirit of confident resolution. The first hours are especially significant, both for gathering eye-witness reports and for applying immediate support both during and following the emergency.

It is as well to recognise, however, that this may be merely the start of challenges for the HR team. One important feature of post-trauma support is in the choice of words that are used in discussion with those affected. Words can impact much more deeply on the sufferer than in normal situations. In the post-traumatic response, words echo differently and dialogue takes on a special intensity of meaning. At these times, the wrong word can derail an

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otherwise smooth-flowing exchange, whilst the right word can immediately stimulate rapport and empathy.

Human resources may also have to deal with employees who are experiencing mental and/or physical problems brought on by the event, and which can persist sometimes for months after and have the potential to seriously affect performance and morale. It is important to remember that the severity of the symptoms and their duration may be affected by the quality and effectiveness of the support that they experience.

If this support is inadequate, or unavailable, then resentment and anger can quickly appear which may have a further effect on productivity and absenteeism.

It is a fact of life that people are not born to understand and manage post-traumatic symptoms. It is not usually part of the skill set that forms an integral part of their training portfolio. However, it is a skill that needs to be acquired to ensure that this essential, human half of your disaster management agenda can be handled as professionally as possible.

Key points: Continuity planning

- Emergency procedures need to be in place as part of a disaster recovery programme.
- The human aspects need to be given as much importance as the logistical.
- HR and management may need to fill a skill-gap in their training portfolio.

- The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

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