

The Resiliency Model: A Resilient Workforce in a Resilient Workplace

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As an executive of a preeminent company, you assess risk and develop emergency plans that include evacuation, safety, and security procedures. You invest in making your infrastructure and IT resilient. Your redundancy and back-ups are in place. Alternate work sites are outfitted and ready to be placed into operation at a moments notice. You are confident that your company is ready for the “big one” when it strikes. It could be a hurricane that causes devastation and flooding. It could be a terrorist attack that results in mass violence, destruction, and fear. It could be pandemic flu that generates widespread illness. Where is your workforce? Hurricane Katrina decimated the workforces of Gulf Coast businesses. In the aftermath of a terrorist attack, your employees might not shelter in place at work, but rather, most likely, would rush off to be with their children and other relatives. It is predicted that a pandemic flu would cause 40% absenteeism, travel restrictions, and school closures. How are planning for these contingencies? What are you doing to provide for your workforce? What are you doing to enhance the resiliency of your most important asset – your people?

On an ordinary day your workforce can be depleted because of absenteeism, disability, and presenteeism. It is easy to measure the cost of absenteeism and disability but presenteeism – people showing up for work but performing poorly because of distress or illness including depression – is the stealth factor in the loss of productivity. An AdvancePCS study has estimated that presenteeism takes a toll of \$180 billion on business. During and in the immediate aftermath of a disaster or public health emergency much of your workforce may be absent. This catastrophic consequence will devastate your bottom line. Later, because of the ongoing distress or mental disorders triggered by the traumatic event, presenteeism will erode your bottom line at great cost to your company. EDS’s former Chairman and CEO Dick Brown states, “A company’s culture is really the behavior of its people.” Do you want defeatist and non-resilient behavior to permeate your entire organization? Can you afford an error of omission? Can you afford to omit implementing strategies that will reduce distress and lessen negative impacts on the health of your workforce?

What is the solution? Take three steps – Embrace, Invest, and Enhance. Embrace mental health in the workplace. Your leadership and corporate culture should embrace a wellness and resiliency mentality. Invest in your people. Enhance the resilience of your workforce. Many companies have made great gains by investing in healthcare and optimizing their human assets. One example is particularly worthy of attention. Highsmith was recently highlighted “as the smartest little company in America.” This company distributes furniture, equipment, and supplies; has a workforce of about 220, and generates over 50 million in annual sales. Highsmith has saved on its annual healthcare costs by initiating a wellness and healthy choice program. Its three year average percentage increase in healthcare premiums from 2002 to 2004 was only 4.9%, well below the national average of 12.6%. Bank One, Constellation Energy Group, Dow, Johnson & Johnson, Pitney Bowes, and 3M are other corporations that have profited by investing in workplace mental health.

Managing mental health in the workplace after a disaster must start before a disaster strikes. In addition to EAP’s, personal health management skills and behavior, nutritional counseling, exercise programs, preventive medicine, a comprehensive wellness and mental health program should include the Resiliency Model, that is, training about personal resiliency management that enhances the resilience of your workforce. “Don’t reinvent the wheel.” There are many programs and books on the market. For example, provide your workforce with a handbook based on a mental health approach that helps them to mitigate, prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. Offer workshops that are designed by experts to meet the needs of your workforce and enhance the resilience of your people in a dangerous world.