

# I Just Laid Off 3/4 of My Team, Now What?

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Today's economic situation is serving up record unemployment rates, continued job losses, and lots of fear. Hurricanes, school shootings, and terrorism fills the news. A friend of mine recently laid off 3/4 of his team, and he's trying to inspire the survivors who feel like soon-to-be-victims. Leadership in times of crisis is hard.

This week's interview is with Bob VandePol, President of [Crisis Care Network](#). He helps leaders respond to crises in the workplace. If you're looking for a dose of resiliency, read on. Bob has a special way of helping leaders step up in times of need. There's no better time than now. Everyone is watching.

**LISA: As President of Crisis Care Network, you're in the business of getting people through tragedy. How can leaders help create calm amidst chaos?**

BOB: The silence can be deafening. When tragedy strikes an organization, leaders experience that daunting split-second upon entry to the scene when all eyes in the room immediately lock on to them. Some eyes are tearful, some hostile, some avoidant, some hopeful, some frightened, and some a million miles away. All are asking questions: Can she help me? Does he pose yet another threat? Does he know his stuff? Does she really care? These questions must be quickly "answered" correctly because both tremendous opportunity and serious risk for individual and organizational recovery are at stake. The moment is pivotal. The pressure's on.

To illustrate, when a high school football player is injured on the field, the student trainers sprint to his aid. Not the doctor. She or he confidently and purposefully strides onto the field in a way that communicates professionalism and control. Quick — but not in a hurry. Sprinting with the trainers or remaining on the sidelines would trigger panic in every seat in the stadium.

Like the team physician, leaders must be prepared to convincingly present that they care plus a quiet confidence in their expertise. Individually and organizationally, recovery is facilitated when the leader can acknowledge the personal impact upon involved people while at the same time transitioning them to next steps. He must embody and communicate the transitions from chaos to structure and helplessness to effective action. Those watching must witness a confident, competent person who doesn't minimize the effect of the incident but communicates an expectation of recovery.

**LISA: The current economic crisis leaves many [MBAs](#) fearing job loss or worse. How can we make the best of a situation that seems harsh and prolonged?**

BOB: Last Autumn, [Crisis Care Network](#) was heavily engaged in response to the '08 hurricane season. Hurricanes and the resultant floods are additionally difficult simply because recovery takes such an agonizingly long time. Often, the greatest source of stress is not the incident itself but having to deal with immense, protracted logistical tedium when not at one's best. The current economic crisis carries with it many dynamics comparable to the impact of a flood: financial ramifications, a sense of powerlessness, an undefined target for attributed blame, and an expanded time frame minus a definable endpoint.

Becoming preoccupied with that which we cannot control only drains us of energy and adds to the frustration. It is important to engage in those activities that are in our control and give immediate results, i.e. keep busy, focused, and productive on today's job. Research has shown that after a natural disaster those who actively engage in purposeful tasks fare better emotionally and physically than those who withdraw or become passive and apathetic. Exercise, rest, and good nutrition at times of high stress are effective strategies to avoid exhaustion and are activities most people have control over, reinforcing a

times of high stress are effective strategies to avoid exhaustion and are activities most people have control over, reinforcing a sense of self-efficacy. Focus upon that over which you DO have control, rather than that over which you have none.

**LISA: You speak professionally about leadership during times of crisis and how leaders determine the trajectory of workplace responses. Tell us a story about a leader who did this well.**

BOB: The incident was a double homicide/suicide in the parking lot of a large manufacturing facility. A dozen employees witnessed the shooting deaths of two co-workers, ducked behind cars to avoid bullets aimed at them, and then watched the shooter turn the gun on himself. Hundreds of additional co-workers did not witness the event but were understandably shaken.

The CEO was a brilliant businessperson but obviously well outside his training, expertise, and comfort zone. Fortunately he realized 1) that his employees were going to go through this tragedy with or without him – so he led them! 2) that he needed to listen to crisis response experts, and 3) that his people needed him to be himself as he stood before them.

He led visibly and used a crisis communication model as taught to him. The **ACT** model provides a structured process to facilitate individual and organizational recovery.

**Acknowledge** and name the incident

- Have an accurate understanding of the facts and avoid conjecture.
- Demonstrate the courage to use real language that specifically names what occurred.
- Acknowledge that the incident has an impact and that individuals will be impacted differently.

**Communicate** pertinent information with both compassion and competence

- In these situations leaders must “know their stuff” in a caring way. Being prepared helps mitigate one’s own anxiety and supports the presentation of quiet strength others need at this time.
- Training, preparation, and practice facilitate a calming, “unscripted” response in which the leader is less likely to make anxiety-driven mistakes and more able to demonstrate caring behavior.

**Transition**

- Sensitively transition to a future focus.
- Communicate an expectation of recovery. Those impacted must gain a vision of “survivor” rather than “victim”.
- Help identify and facilitate access to the individuals’ natural resiliency supports – both internal and external. Encourage “return to work” and “return to life” normalcy firmly and flexibly. Problem-solve practical solutions, but not in a way in which people feel that their productivity is more important than their personhood.

Although the incident was tragic and impacted many people, the CEO led in a way that facilitated a renewed sense of community, support, and motivation.

**LISA: What can we do to prevent a post-crisis meltdown in an organization?**

BOB: Yes, leaders must focus upon return to productivity via business continuity plans to address IT, infrastructure, power, etc. but should not forget their people. As quoted by Marsh Crisis Academy (2003):

There is no business recovery without people who:

- Are healthy enough to return to work and be productive
- Are assured enough of their safety to not feel afraid to return to work
- Have had their trust in the leadership established so that they desire to return to work
- Have had their loyalty rewarded so they remain employees over the short haul and the long haul

**LISA: Hurricane Ike got a lot less press in 2008 than Katrina did in 2005 or the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004. Do you think that we get fatigued by repeated tragedy? If so, how do we not turn into disinterested fellow humans?**

BOB: I’m not certain that media coverage is an accurate indicator of compassion but rather of financial opportunity. Tragedy plus any controversy sells papers. I think that “over-coverage” of the initial event can predict under-coverage of those that follow. Likewise, the relative disparity in coverage between the shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois probably did not mean that people cared less about the second set of students. But they were second!

When listening to the radio traffic report, the definition of a “minor fender bender” is one that happens to someone else! In these days of instantaneous, intimate media coverage of worldwide tragedies we can prevent desensitization and resultant disinterest by getting personally involved in finding solutions. Volunteering to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and protect the abused makes it personal and keeps us in touch.

There is no greater honor and no greater responsibility than to be there for someone on the worst day of their life.

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Thank you for the interview, Bob.

For more information on the Crisis Care Network, visit [their website](#). To get more of Bob, consider hiring him as a [speaker](#) at your next event.