

Invisible Casualties: Overcoming Adversity after a Tragedy in the Workplace

(A Quick Reference Guide)

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Dedication

Normally, I am self-sufficient and known as the person who “powers through” to get the job done no matter what. But in December of 2015, something happened while on the job that shattered my world. I felt lost, shut down and unable to function in typical and familiar ways. I am eternally grateful for the “angels in disguise” who came to help make this a temporary situation. Without their patience and guidance, I do not know how I would have gotten through that bleak period.

Gary and Courtney – Thanks for always taking my phone calls, getting me off the ledge and giving me the guidance and courage I needed to get through the traumatic aftermath I experienced after the San Bernardino shootings. Without your reassurance, I would not be sharing my story.

Rachel and Barbara - You two are truly gifted therapists! I am lucky to have been able to work with both of you.

Cindy – Your sense of humour is greatly appreciated. Absolutely love the Lego Wonder Woman keychain you gave me for encouragement. It’s a conversation starter for sure.

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Foreword

It has been less than a year since the San Bernardino Shootings. In the aftermath of the second largest terrorist attack on U.S. soil since 9/11, the tally was 14 dead, 22 injured. Since then more mass tragedies have occurred than I care to think about. The media relentlessly streams coverage of these events along with advertisements that offer classes on how to protect yourself during an active shooter situation, which I believe is important. Oddly, though, very little information is provided to help employees, witnesses, family members and others who must return to work after such events while also dealing with the devastating emotional toll that tragedies like this extract. These people are the invisible casualties no one is talking about.

The oversight has nothing to do with a lack of caring. Instead, “active shooter” situations are a new experience for Corporate America even though shooting tragedies are not new. Consequently, no one knows how to prepare for or handle the aftermath. Instead, most organizations are “reacting” to the situation or making their responses up as they go. Reactive, poorly handled responses do not deal with tragedy and the lingering effects of trauma. Nor do they support staff or the organization after such an event.

Even as a 25-year career professional in the Human Resource field, I was not thinking that way either. That is, not until I found myself trying to deal with the emotional turmoil following the December 2015 massacre in San Bernardino, California. I was working in the building next door to the shootings and afterwards, found myself in “lockdown” for over eight hours. Lockdown is a procedure that was used to secure the location in order to ensure safety for everyone within the building; it was initiated by my organization and later kept in place by law enforcement. Once this procedure is enacted, all doors into or out of the building were locked, no one was allowed in or out of the building, employees were moved away from windows and relocated to the back half of the building with the understanding that if there more gunshots, we would be moved again. Lastly, any employees who were off-sight conducting business were instructed to report to their homes until further notice. All updates from law enforcement were communicated to the Director.

When I returned home to Colorado I was still in shock, suffering emotional trauma, and I was receiving limited support from my organization, the insurance community and co-workers. Part of this experience included being asked well-meaning, yet inappropriate, questions about the shootings. My job performance was questioned. I heard medical and legal professionals make comments like, “Wow, I’ve never seen this before. I’ll have to look into this and get back to you.” Responses like this made the experience even more traumatic and isolating and forced me to live off my savings for almost six months while my case was “under review” by various benefits carriers who didn’t know how to process post-traumatic stress claims through established channels. Throughout this entire, drawn-out ordeal, I could not help but think there must be a better way to handle this type of situation in the workplace.

As the months wore on, I began tracking what I perceived as “missed opportunities” during which my employer and/or insurance carriers could have handled the situation better while also protecting the organization. To build on these ideas I created a spreadsheet outlining before, during and after steps that an organization can take to prepare for the occurrence of a tragedy. This quick reference guide is labelled Appendix B and included at the back of the book.

Now I feel compelled to watch coverage of other mass tragedies, but I look at them very differently. I question how the employers involved will work with returning employees. I wonder what types of support systems are in place for both the employee and the organization that will limit both personal and financial impacts. After each new incident I find myself more fascinated with all the “missteps” I experienced, and think about ways I can help ensure others do not go through what I experienced. What I originally considered a tragedy has now become a learning opportunity and a chance to share with others how things can be done differently. My goal in writing this book is to give employers a quick reference guide that provides insight into traumatized employees, offers suggestions for including mental health management into their crisis management plan and points out how to limit financial exposure to the organization when crisis happens.

Chapter 1

December 2, 2015

I share my experience with the San Bernardino shootings so others can benefit from what I learned. Eventually, I was able to process this tragedy and I want others who have undergone similar situations to know there is light at the end of the tunnel. The other reason for this book is to share information that will help organizations prepare for and deal with this new area of crisis management.

Knock, knock. "I wanted to let you know we are in lockdown. Nothing to worry about." Director (December 2, 2015).

San Bernardino (SB) and I have an interesting history; I was there twice before and neither visit was a great experience. During my first trip, I was almost mugged because I was clueless to this type of thing. I thought the guy was trying to be nice and carry my laptop bag for me – wrong. Fortunately, another gentleman stepped in and stopped the man from stealing my computer. On the second trip, I came home with a raging case of pink eye that lasted four months! I haven't had pinkeye since I was in grade school. Not only did I catch pinkeye, but upon my return, several of my co-workers also contracted pinkeye because I could not get rid of it. It gave the appearance of being cleared up, but then would come back with a vengeance. It was a long four months. Now, on the third trip, I found myself next door to the San Bernardino shootings.

The trip to San Bernardino was planned for early November, but for whatever reason, it kept getting pushed back. As fate would have it, the trip was finalized the day before Thanksgiving. A co-worker and I would arrive Monday, November 30th and leave Thursday, December 3rd. We were traveling to San Bernardino to conduct two human resource investigations.

The trip started out nicely enough. Our building was next to the two Southern California Inland Regional Center Buildings; I remember commenting on how pretty the buildings were. The lunchroom in our building had two walls of glass and bumped up to the small parking lot where we parked. The lunchroom also overlooked the Inland Regional Center's Building parking lot.

The morning of the shootings, my co-worker and I were interviewing employees in a conference room. Sometime around 11 a.m. the director knocked on the conference door and informed us we were in lockdown. She said she did not have any details, but had calls in to the police department. About ten minutes later, she returned and said the situation was much worse than originally thought and that the site was now contacting the family members of the participants at our facility to reassure them their loved ones were safe. Our facility works with people over 55 as well as those with disabilities. The goal of the program is to keep participants healthy, active/engaged and living life on their terms. This location provides a number of services to enhance their experience which includes basic healthcare services, meals and social activities. That day there were approximately 50-participants on-site. When pressed for additional details, the director wouldn't elaborate. She left to contact law enforcement again.

Everything about her demeanor was unnerving. She was jumpy and evasive when we asked for more information. Being told to "sit tight" makes me all the more curious, so my co-worker and I walked down the hall to the breakroom after she left. The room was full of employees, most of who were playing with their smart phones. "Is it lunch time?" I asked. In unison, the group said, "No." One person explained a last minute meeting had been called, and then the location went into lockdown. Now, no one could leave. As she was talking, I looked up and saw a man in a brown uniform running past me on the other side of the glass carrying a very large gun. He felt close enough to touch. "*Is that the S.W.A.T. Team?*" I asked.

"Yeah, you should have seen them a few minutes ago," a man said. "They were jumping off the roof and rappelling down the side of the building. We still aren't sure what's happening, but this," as he points outside, "keeps getting bigger and bigger." While he was talking I noticed what seemed like hundreds of armed law enforcement including S.W.A.T. bomb trucks and bomb sniffing dogs. Emergency lights were set up everywhere. Some of this commotion was up close and very real. Then I heard helicopters. The only way to describe the scene is to imagine an action movie like *Die Hard* or *White House Down*. Everything seemed to move in slow motion; the situation was so surreal. I didn't know it at the time, but that was the moment I went into shock and shut down. Even today, if you

ask me what I remember about the shootings, it's the S.W.A.T. guy running past me with his gun.

We asked where the nearest TV was and were told none of them would be turned on in order to keep from alarming the participants. The director came in to move all employees to a safer location, further inside the building and away from the glass. On the way back to the conference room, I said someone needed to contact our Employee Assistance Program Provider and have trauma therapists on site as soon as possible.

While we watched streaming coverage on our lap tops of what was going on right next to us, employees kept stopping by to get updates. Some stayed a few minutes, others left almost immediately. To me, the Internet was both a blessing and a curse. On one hand it told me what was happening, but on the other, it increased the stress level because everything was happening right outside, not even 70 yards away, but we couldn't see anything. Instead, we could only hear a lot of commotion and the ever-present sound of helicopters. This type of experience, hearing but not seeing what's happening, can cause the primal portion of the brain, that's the portion of the brain hardwired to react to real and/or perceived threats, to go into "overdrive" and make up stories to explain what is happening. Depending on what the mind envisions, those stories can be even more traumatizing than the actual event since the brain tends to generate worse case scenarios. For some, this type of experience causes extreme fear or feelings of helplessness. For me, it felt like none of this was really happening; I shut down and went numb. It did not occur to me to contact family or friends to tell them what was happening and let them know I was safe. I travel often, and on more than one occasion have not told people where I was going, which was the case this time. No one knew I was in San Bernardino. That is, until we were told the shooters got out of the Inland Regional Center building next to us and law enforcement officials believed they were still in the vicinity.

My first thoughts were, did we go into lockdown soon enough? Is one of the shooters in the building with us? Could one of them be desperate enough to storm our building for cover? That's the moment I felt true fear and decided it was time to send a text to family. If I hadn't been concerned with making sure my pets were taken care of, I wouldn't have told anyone what was happening. I would have just stopped talking and simply shut down. While I can't remember

exactly what I texted to my family, I do remember feeling very sick to my stomach as I typed, "I'm scared." This, of course, set off a barrage of text messages. Some helped; some made me feel worse for having scared them so badly. I hated bringing them into this horrible situation and I hated myself for being a victim. Crazy, huh?

In the midst of these thoughts another employee turned to me and asked, "If someone knocks on the door asking to be let in, are you going to open the door?" I remember feeling like a bag of wet cement; I could not move and I couldn't speak. I remember thinking, "No." I was just as horrified at my answer as I was about what was happening around me. Knowing that nothing could have enticed me to open the door made me start to question who I was fundamentally, as a human being. After all, I wanted to believe that in an emergency situation I would help others. But the reality was, I was paralyzed and couldn't move. The conflict in my mind and the resulting paralysis was fear-driven. Opening the door when I didn't know if the person asking to be let in was one of the shooters, or somebody running from the shooters, was just too much of a gamble for me to take. The feeling of being safe, which is so basic to our welfare, had been violated by what was going on around us. Opening the door could have put me and my co-workers in mortal danger. Instead of recognizing that this was the reality of the day, I remember asking myself what type of person doesn't open the door? A "good person" helps other people; a "good person" would open the door. I was haunted for months by my behavior, and the internal dialogue. The rest of the day was a blur, filled with noises from law enforcement, streaming MSN and texting family and friends. For me, one of the worst parts was hearing everything, but being able to see nothing.

We stayed in lockdown more than eight hours. Eventually, we were allowed to return to the breakroom where we could see almost everything. We watched the bomb-sniffing dogs cover every car and every inch of the parking lot. One seemed fixated on an empty spot a "stones throw" from where I was parked. An employee commented, "I bet that's where they were parked," and she was right. I later found out our receptionist heard a string of gunshots coming from the direction of the Social Service conference room and another employee saw the shooter's SUV parked in the same spot the dog was sniffing.

Later that afternoon, law enforcement held a question and answer session at our location; they also asked for a head count. I didn't think anything of the headcount until much later when I was told this system is used by law enforcement to determine if anyone was in the building who shouldn't be (i.e. a shooter). They later agreed to let us leave the building, participants first, with the understanding we would be escorted to our vehicles. Finally – freedom!

When the back door opened it was pitch black. A breeze blew into the room. I remember thinking, "We're free. I want to go home." But before the first van started, a pipe bomb and its detonator were found in the parking lot. Back into lockdown we went. Sometime later, we were finally released. Everyone had a police escort to his or her car and each vehicle was thoroughly searched before we could leave. Even though my car was directly outside the door, we still had to be escorted by law enforcement, all of whom were carrying huge guns and bomb detectors.

Once I got into the car I noticed it seemed like daytime outside. Everywhere you looked there were lights, emergency vehicles, and every kind of law enforcement imaginable, including the F.B.I. Because of this, I couldn't drive straight down the street. Instead, I had to weave in and out around a number of obstacles which brought me past the conference room in the Inland Regional Center Building where the shootings occurred. I remember turning to my co-worker and asking, "Do you think the bodies are still in there?" She stared at the building white as a ghost and said, "I'm sure they are."

As I drove past the building the situation became more and more unbelievable. Every type of light imaginable was trained on the building's front entrance and on the conference room. It was both scary and electric. I felt fear, sadness and rage. In that moment a realization hit me in the core, hard. *There are bodies inside; I'm driving past a massacre.* I felt incredible sadness for the families and despair in thinking the dead were being disrespected. Their bodies had not been moved, and would not be moved for a long time. To this day, I still do not understand how someone could kill helpless people/co-workers in cold blood. These people trusted the shooter, embraced him into the work family and even gave the couple a baby shower when they became pregnant. Situations such as this impact the people affected by destroying their ability to trust, their right to feel safe; both fundamental needs of human beings.

As we turned the corner, we were hit with a massive crowd of reporters. There must have been hundreds of them. They lined both sides of the street, vying for the best shot of us leaving the scene. You see this type of coverage on TV all the time, but nothing prepares you to experience it in person. We drove the rest of the way to the hotel in silence. I vaguely recall searching for a gas station, having dinner, texting, calling family members and returning to hotel room to pack my bag. Both my co-worker and I attempted to catch a flight home that night, but it was impossible. We had to stay another night in San Bernardino.

One of the eeriest effects of the aftermath was the lack of activity at the hotel. When we arrived, it was during the city's Festival of Lights with thousands and thousands of lights hung in the trees and holiday decorations everywhere you looked. I had been staying on the third floor and my window looked out over the courtyard. Each night I could hear and see the crowds walking by enjoying the scenery. But tonight it felt like a ghost town. Silent, with no visitors. Any other night I would have complained about the drunks making noise outside my window. But tonight, when I would have welcomed them, they were not there. Needing something to lend a sense of normalcy to the evening I turned on the television, making sure to stay away from media coverage of the massacre. I remember watching Expedition Unknown host Josh Gates and feeling as though I was seeing him through a tunnel. I didn't get much sleep that night. I left the lights and TV on for company.

The next morning I got up at 5 a.m. to catch my flight to Denver and report to work. I felt lost in a fog, completely shut down. The first person I spoke to worked at the airport coffee counter. Being surrounded by strangers and the normal noise and chaos of the airport made me very uncomfortable. I wanted to go home. After finding a quiet place in a small corner, I sat with my back against the wall watching everyone and just "being" until it was time to board my flight. I avoided all TV(s), which turned out to be a challenge since coverage of the tragedy was on almost every station and crowds of people surrounded every television. Apparently, I spoke to my twin sister as I was waiting to catch my flight, but I have no memory of talking to her. It wasn't until later, when she called to make sure I was okay, that I remembered.

The flight was soothing. I felt safe enough to talk to the man sitting next to me for a few minutes. Curious as to what we talked about? Forbes Magazine; we had different issues. Once we landed, I sent a text to my director telling her I was going to have lunch and would be working from home. I did manage to log in for about 30 minutes and was surprised by the number of emails I had asking for immediate responses. Considering my "Out of Office" said I had been working in San Bernardino and there had been multiple updates sent to all employees regarding the San Bernardino situation, my immediate reaction was, *Have you people been under a rock? Why are you emailing me as if nothing happened?* I lasted about 30 minutes online and then passed out from exhaustion.

Chapter 1 Takeaways

Below are the key points from the chapter:

- There is a mass shooting 70 yards from the facility in which many people are working.
- Employees witness the beginning of the situation but are later moved to an area where they can only “hear” what is happening outside the door.
- Reports state the shooters have escaped from the building. Our location is unsure whether the building we are in went into lockdown quickly enough to prevent the shooters from entering the building.
- Very limited information was given throughout the day. The only updates came from streaming coverage through the Internet.
- Our location was in lockdown for more than eight hours.
- Law enforcement gave two updates late afternoon, providing limited information.
- Employee witnesses were taken for questioning by the F.B.I.
- Once released from lockdown, police carrying bomb detection equipment escorted employees to their cars. Before anyone gets to their car, a bomb was found in the parking lot behind a van.
- Traumatized employees were released and instructed to drive home. The route included driving past the massacre and into a sea of reporters.
- The organization’s San Bernardino employees were told to stay home until further notice.
- The organization’s corporate employees were instructed to fly home the next day and report to work.
- The following day is business as usual for the corporate employees with immediately deadlines to meet.

IDEAL SCENARIO

Protocols should be developed and put in place in the event a traumatic scenario unfolds in the workplace. This should include potential scenarios along with different responds to requests such as opening a door, with the ultimate decision being left up to the individual with their safety always being priority.

Educating employees on different responses to different scenarios will assist with decreasing employee's questioning their morality.

Additionally, when employees experience a traumatic event, the organization should ensure staff is safely delivered to their desired location rather than allowing them to drive in a traumatized state. In addition, sufficient downtime for assimilation purposes should be offered along with providing consideration for reduced work responsibilities, flexible schedules, or time off for medical needs for a designated period once returning to work.