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DISASTER PLANNING AND RECOVERY

The Human Element of Disaster Recovery

As the value of information increases, disaster recovery planning is recognized more and more as being critical to both the public and private sectors. Consequently, records managers have worked towards developing disaster recovery guidelines and standards. However, when planning to protect an organization's vital records, one element—the human element—is often overlooked.

When disaster strikes in a community it is often possible that the people expected to carry out the office disaster recovery plan are the same people who have suffered personnel loss and/or injury. The focus of this article will be on the four general phases of the emotional recovery process, and how to consider them when creating a disaster recovery plan.

By JANET L. VOSSLER

On August 1, 1985 a storm of historic proportion swept through Cheyenne, Wyoming. The storm, centered on the city, dumped six inches of rain and six inches of hail in less than four hours. Cars and trucks were swept away as streets were transformed into rushing rivers.

The flood caused an estimated \$50 million in damages. Approximately 2,000 homes and businesses were destroyed. Twelve residents lost their lives. As Army and Air National Guard were called in to assist with rescue and recovery operations, the community was declared a national disaster area. Although the disaster was of a lesser magnitude than some, the Cheyenne community shared an emotional commonality that is apparent in many emergency situations.

Even though disaster recovery plans are always tailored for particular organizations, the technical aspects of these plans—what to do and how to do it—are basically generic. One develops and implements a vital records program to protect essential records. After a disaster occurs one recovers papers, microforms, and even magnetic information. Backup equipment is provided

for. But it is critical that people's emotions—the human element—also be linked to the technical areas and considered when developing a disaster recovery plan. One cannot plan *who* the disaster will hit or how hard.

Business must understand and recognize that emotional trauma will undoubtedly be felt in emergency situations. Because of this, a disaster recovery plan cannot be developed with even one person considered as "irreplaceable." Disasters are unpredictable. There is no way to predetermine who will sustain personal injury, or loss of life. The "key player" may be non-functional—or even dead. From a records management perspective, the focus of attention should not be solely on the backup of vital records, but on the backup of vital people as well.

Communities are not normally equipped to handle disasters on a regular basis. There is neither sufficient manpower nor funds. Therefore, in any presidentially declared disaster Federal grants are available through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and administered by the National Institute of Mental Health, Emergency Services Division (NIMH). In essence, the Federal grants serve as a backup system to offer mental health relief to disaster stricken communities.

Immediately after the 1985 disaster in Cheyenne, the NIMH met with the local mental health officials to assist in the grant application process. There were two grants awarded. The first, an Immediate Services Grant, was issued on August 16, 1985. Consequently, the Flood Outreach Team was organized with local people. The team, consisting of one psychologist, three full-time counselors, and one part-time counselor, was trained by a professional disaster therapist in addition to receiving program administration training. Brochures were developed to communicate to the community what the Flood Outreach Team was and that it was available. The first grant was effective through the end of October 1985.

The second grant, a Regular Programs Grant, was a \$105,093 self-sustaining award to cover overhead and salaries for nine months—November 1, 1985 through July 31, 1986—so that the Flood Outreach Team would be able to offer their counseling services to the public free of charge. In a situation where there are losses, as Cheyenne had, it is generally two to three months before counseling work can begin that will be beneficial to people. Also, special school related projects were developed primarily to deal with the emotional trauma of children.

FOUR PHASES OF DISASTER RECOVERY

The focus of the Flood Outreach Team was on the four emotional phases of disaster recovery: heroic, honeymoon, disillusionment, and reconstruction.

The HEROIC PHASE occurs at the impact of the disaster. Individuals will take immediate action to save lives and property. During this phase, family, neighbors, friends, and emergency personnel are the key resources. In this initial phase business disaster team leaders must exercise extreme caution. It is from the Heroic Phase that lawsuits can emanate. Although many emergency situations are life threatening, most times the employee will not consider: if the flood water is contaminated, if there is a chance of being electrocuted, if the building is structurally sound, and so on. After the Cheyenne disaster stories surfaced of how citizens and emergency personnel risked their own lives to save others. This is true of most disasters, particularly ones of any size.

Certainly, management does not want staff to risk their own well being attempting to save documents and/or equipment. But remember, in the Heroic Phase many people are overcome by the desire to take immediate action to save property. One organization in Cheyenne had two of their employees work all night trying to pump water out of a basement room where expensive microfilm equipment was set up. They did save the equipment, but after the flood they questioned their heroic actions. They had endangered their lives for equipment . . . which could have been replaced.

The disaster team should not enter or direct other employees to enter a disaster site unless it is relatively safe and they have on the appropriate protective gear. For example, in the Cheyenne flood recovery, operations should not have been attempted without each person involved wearing hip boots and rubber gloves. When flooding occurs water flows into a water treatment plant at a rate faster than the water can be treated to go into the main supply. Sewer lines back up and sewage mixes with the water. The result is usually contamination. Because the majority of individuals did not dress appropriately during recovery, Cheyenne health officials administered 1,500

tetanus shots after the flood.

The HONEYMOON PHASE occurs immediately after impact and for the first one to two weeks following. It can extend from three to six months afterwards. Social and community support systems initiate massive clean-up efforts. Vast volunteer efforts are formed to assist both the individuals and the businesses facing the enormous clean-up tasks. The persons in the community or organization sense having "shared" a dangerous experience and having lived through it. External support groups (for example, state and federal) come into the community and anticipation is high that these groups will be able to provide enough financial assistance to put everything back to normal. Cheyenne, being the hub for city, county, and state government offices, believed that the federal government would provide adequate financing to get back to normal.

During the Honeymoon Phase people need to believe that the damage will be repaired quickly and easily. Although entire departments had their offices washed away, political opposites worked together to set up temporary work sites, locate equipment, and obtain supplies. Hopes were high that documents thought to be unsalvageable would be recovered.

While on the "honeymoon," the realities of long-term reconstruction and resolution are not yet confronted. A sense of optimism is often experienced about the rebuilding process. Feelings of being overwhelmed by the task may tend to be denied.

The disaster recovery plan should be geared to take advantage of the Honeymoon Phase. Employees want to get everything back in place. Adrenalin is high. Volunteers are plentiful and eager to assist. Perhaps even a branch of the armed services is at hand to help. Use the resources—but use them appropriately! After the disaster recovery teams have assessed damages, assign the volunteers to specific tasks. Those tasks may include: boxing of documents to be recovered, carrying out boxes, carrying messages, preparing and/or getting food to workers, pulling up ruined floor coverings, removing destroyed equipment and furniture. A lot can be accomplished during the Honeymoon Phase, but . . . the "shared" comradery dissipates long before the work is through.

The DISILLUSIONMENT

PHASE occurs about two to three months after impact and may extend for as much as one to two years. Support agencies decrease their personnel and operations. Grant/loan awards may prove to be less than anticipated. Family pressures and stresses may be high. Ironically, at a time when support and understanding are most important, the community and its victims tend to withdraw from each other.

In December 1985, four months after the flood, a 66-year-old woman described the dreams she continued to experience of the substantial loss she suffered as the flood waters swelled into her home that previous summer night. The dreams the woman spoke of were not unusual, because depression, anxiety, and fear generally intensify during the two to three month period following a disaster. How do people cope? First, they must recognize themselves as victims. The reality of the stress being felt can not be minimized. Second, they must determine the things that need to be dealt with. When people are forced into situations of high stress, such as disaster, it can tap into unresolved issues. For example, take a records clerk working with birth and death certificates. As a result of a disaster those important records are destroyed. As a child the records clerk experienced the loss of a sibling, but was able to suppress the feelings of loss until the disaster occurred. Suddenly those repressed feelings become apparent and the records clerk is dealing with several kinds of emotional problems.

It is during the Disillusionment Phase that employees who have been displaced either at home or at the office experience an increased sense of disappointment, resentment, grief, and anger. In the Laramie County offices, managers found that they spent more time than ever before dealing with personnel problems. Absenteeism increased, partly due to the depression employees felt. In two of the departments that were established in temporary offices in the hall on the second floor of the courthouse, the employees became quite irritable a couple of months after the flood. They had no phones, too many interruptions, and no appropriate equipment to complete their tasks. They expressed the attitude, "Why come to work?" Increased complaints and absenteeism, however, are not just due to mental fatigue. In the aftermath of

The Human Element of Disaster Recovery . . .

a disaster, the bacteria that lingers and grows in buildings after flooding can host serious diseases. Be sensitive to changes in an employee's physical condition. Listen to complaints. Check with the local health officials on any facts or referrals they can give concerning the possibility of community disease. Add a health and wellness section to the disaster recovery plan.

It can be an especially difficult time if the disaster occurs in late summer or early fall as it did in Cheyenne. With no time to recover from the financial hardship or the emotional scars of disaster, the holiday season begins. The disaster recovery plan should provide for a source of emotional support such as: a post disaster staff party; a fund raiser for those employees who had losses; a bonus vacation day. By interacting, employees are often jointly able to resolve issues, decreasing any long-term problems that may threaten their or the organization's well-being.

THE RECONSTRUCTION PHASE occurs six months to several years after the impact. Victims and community confront the realization of the rebuilding process. New or remodeled construction replaces destroyed or damaged buildings. Such construction and planning allows victims to reaffirm their belief in their own and the community's capabilities. However, delays in reconstruction may prolong individuals' emotional scars and make full recovery more difficult.

In Cheyenne, officials anticipate that the battles with insurance companies will go on for years. There were 144 people in the area who had flood insurance policies at the time of the flood. However, those flood insurance policies only covered the structure of the home, not the contents. Unfortunately, most people lost all or a good part of the contents which were insured for probably everything except a flood. At Christmas time this was evident when many organizations rallied to provide financial support for residents to purchase a few decorations. So many people lost their years and years accumulation of sentiment and tradition.

When the summer of the following year (1986) arrived in Cheyenne,



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many residents realized, after their homes had been rebuilt, that they hadn't worked their fears through. At the first crack of lightening, with the first drop of rain—panic.

Disaster workers, field workers, and social service personnel essentially become victims of disasters too. They listen to many hours of conversation about the difficulties victims have had and must be careful that they do not begin to feel "down" as well. Emergency management personnel routinely experience what they term "burn out" approximately six months after a fairly large disaster. They encounter difficulty in accomplishing work. They feel as though they have many things that need to be done but it takes more time than they thought it would. Their advice is to realize that it won't all get done yesterday and to take a vacation.

During this final phase, the reconstruction peaks and residents with long term interest in the community are increasingly more active. After a

1979 tornado in Cheyenne, long-standing members of the community became involved and formed the Interfaith Task Force headed by the retired director of Laramie County Social Services. The Task Force worked through the churches to collect money and goods to be disbursed to disaster victims. When the flood occurred, the community support provided through that same Task Force helped fill many financial gaps that would otherwise have remained.

In management, it is impossible not to be involved for many months or even years with disaster recovery efforts. But the employees should be kept involved too. Ideally, if office furniture were destroyed in a disaster, a realistic time frame to expect delivery of new furniture would be six weeks. When the furniture order is delayed and it takes twice that long, employees begin to wonder if they'll ever again have a place to work under normal conditions. The Reconstruction Phase of disaster recovery can be compared to building a home. There are many things that must be attended to. If employees must spend eight hours a day in an office, then they should be included in choosing the wall covering, floor covering, and light fixtures. Ask them for ideas on office arrangement. Include them in discussions of major equipment or furniture purchases with sales representatives. Give them the incentive to put the pieces back together. More than any other time managers must let their employees believe that normality will exist. As they participate and watch the progress with you every step of the way, the end result can be that a little of that "shared" comradery felt in Honeymoon Phase will remain.

CONCLUSION

Disaster recovery is important not only to the records management profession, but to the entire business community. Business or government must be ready to deal with the psychological effects of disaster. While writing or testing your disaster recovery plan remember to include the human element. Regardless of how sophisticated technology is and how smart the outside experts are, the *people* who suffered in the disaster are the ones who ultimately are responsible for making things better. They must be encouraged and motivated, as well as directed.

