

Workplace tragedy: Employer communication and crisis response

If a serious workplace incident occurs, the employer's response to it, and their treatment of the worker and family, can make an enormous difference in how the family deals with the tragedy and heals afterwards. Threads of Life, the Association for Workplace Tragedy Family Support, surveyed its members to gather their impressions of how they were treated by the employer in the aftermath of either a workplace fatality, or a life-altering injury. Key recommendations are below. For the full report visit threadsoflife.ca.

1 GO

It may be the most difficult thing a senior manager, CEO or human resources professional ever has to do, but it is highly recommended that a senior representative of the company go to see the family.

2 TELL

The importance of information was emphasized in every response to the Threads of Life survey. Ideally, companies should develop a response plan and policy on communication before it is ever required, and make both available to anyone who may be called upon to communicate with the family in the event of an incident. Offer the family what information you can about what happened, acknowledging that you don't know all the details.

3 SUPPORT

There are forms of support, both immediate and longer-term, which are meaningful to and appreciated by a family in the wake of a serious workplace injury or death. In some cases these are simple things – staying with the individual until another family member can arrive, driving relatives to the hospital, making phone calls to clergy and others. Ask what you can do to help – even if the assistance is not required, the offer may be a step toward building a relationship.

4 HONOUR

One thing many families both dread and resent is the idea that the workplace has simply moved on, and the worker has been forgotten. Families understand that the work goes on, but they value companies' efforts to honour the worker.

5 KEEP IN TOUCH

Injured workers and their families in particular spoke of being cut off and isolated from their former workplace. Families appreciated when an employer maintained "open lines of communication" with them.