Organizational climate change

The climate in emergency services organizations is changing and it’s becoming clear that employees are being traumatized more by organizational than operational stressors.

Some of the organizational stressors relate to how emergency services administrators respond to operational stressors. For instance, some present hurdle after hurdle to employees who have been traumatized by their work.

They may make insensitive comments such as “That’s what we signed up for” or “We have all had to deal with these types of calls” (as if the person struggling is somehow falling short or personally weak for having a normal reaction to trauma).

Requiring people to prove that their work has created problems for their health and mental well-being can be stressful, possibly adding to self-doubt.

Given first responders’ constant exposure to the suffering of others I find it astonishing that they have to fight to prove their claim.

To presume an employee is “off duty mad” or somehow trying to cheat the system is a slap in the face not only to the person who is struggling but also to those who care about them and those who will be affected by their work in the future.

It is also a disservice to co-workers who may be affected by the employee’s absence because it sends a message that their claims lack substance until they prove them.

Several very brave individuals are speaking up and out against stigmatization and denial of work-related injuries, advocating for themselves and others who are struggling but feel silenced by an organizational culture that encourages keeping it all in. Advocating for one’s rights isn’t a choice that all can make because speaking out carries considerable career risks.

Emergency service agencies have been known to deny desirable assignments or promotion opportunities to those who are open about their difficulties. They become labeled as not cutting it and/or being trouble-makers, which substantiates administrators’ decisions to block them from future opportunities even though they may be better suited than others who hide their difficulties.

At least these individuals are aware of their struggles and take measures to improve their health. Making matters worse, when employees ask for support services they often have to go through a superior to get the referral information. In effect, they have to choose between their well-being and their career opportunities.

Emergency services organizations would be well-advised to invest in their employees’ well-being so that they can be healthier as individuals. Healthier people make better employees. They should be promoting access to health support services for both “mental” and “physical” wellness (although I don’t really see the difference between the two categories).

Fortunately, some of the people speaking out are emergency services administrators. I’ve spoken with several passionate and concerned managers who are scrambling to try to provide the much needed support their agency has historically lacked.

Additionally, employee wellness programs are being developed in response to the increased attention given to first responders’ mental health concerns.

The added attention is thanks to the advocacy work of several first responders with work-related mental health concerns and the staggering increase in first responder suicides over the last few years. Employee wellness program approaches have been multi-faceted and include various initiatives for promoting physical and psychological well-being.

My suggestion for a comprehensive wellness program is to build initiatives around multiple stages in first responders’ careers and to include groups that are often forgotten.

First, academy training is vital to introduce preventative measures such as adaptive coping responses to traumatic stressors. Strategies such as creating a transition ritual for going home from work, for example.

Preventative training can also provide information about how trauma affects the brain, normalizing the recruits’ possible future responses. This kind of training isn’t “one and done” kind of situation. It needs to be repeated throughout a first responders’ career.

Police officers have told me that they did not pay attention to the advice the first time they heard it. They had to hear it again, at the right time, when they could use the information. Recruits could also be encouraged to keep the written information from the initial training in a special place so they will have it if they need it.

I have said it in several previous columns; but I will keep saying it until it is heard that there are several groups who seemed to be missed by training programs – call takers/dispatchers, other civilian employees who are exposed to human tragedies, retirees and first responder families. A comprehensive wellness program would include members of these often marginalized groups.

Lastly, beyond the initial and ongoing training, first responders need stronger support from critical incident stress management teams. They are trained to provide peer support and arrange connections to professional support, if needed.

Emergency service organizations who value their most valuable asset, their employees, would be wise to invest financially in peer support or CISM teams. Fewer people are better positioned and more culturally competent and they are excellent sources for additional support when more is needed.

I loved my time as a peer support/CISM member but felt like we were an afterthought by the police agency. It did not put its money where its mouth was and fund our team so that we could support others when they really needed it.

Despite some of the “climate changes,” more support is needed if emergency services organizations hope to provide employees the kind of environment that will promote their health. I am hopeful though because it appears they are getting warmer.

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