A Quick Reference Guide for Leaders After a Workplace Critical Incident or Traumatic Death

Immediate Actions (First 2-4 Hours)

Secure and Coordinate

- Coordinate with authorities if required (Police, WorkSafe)
- Secure the location and ensure immediate team safety
- Identify who witnessed the event or worked closely with the deceased

Communication Cascade

- Notify senior leadership immediately and decide what will be communicated, to whom, and when
- Prepare a brief, factual statement (avoid speculation)
- Plan internal communications before external, and designate one person to manage external inquiries

Critical: What NOT to do

- Don't rush to "business as usual" messaging
- Don't speculate on cause or circumstances
- Don't assume people want to talk (or don't want to talk)

Supporting Your Team (4-48 Hours)

Immediate Support Needs

- Bring in **specialist workplace grief support** (EAP alone is often insufficient for traumatic events)
- Offer private space for those who need it and allow time for shock and initial processing
- Consider sending affected staff home with support person if appropriate

Practical Decisions

- Who will cover the deceased's immediate work responsibilities?
- What flexibility do closely affected staff need in the short term?

Watch For: Hidden Safety Risks

Grief causes **measurable cognitive impairment** that peaks in the first weeks:

Risk indicators:

- Reduced concentration and capacity to make decisions
- Slower reaction times and spatial awareness issues
- Sleep deprivation affecting alertness
- Emotional overwhelm affecting judgment
- **In high risk environments:** Consider temporarily reassigning safety critical tasks motional overwhelm affecting judgment

When Standard EAP Isn't Enough

EAP is designed for individuals; traumatic workplace events create team level impacts:

- Collective shock and confusion
- Workplace specific fears (returning to the location, seeing colleagues, productivity)
- Questions about "what do we say/do" that need organisational guidance
- Immediate response may be needed when EAP wait times don't match the urgency

Specialist crisis response addresses:

- **Immediate availability (within 48 hours)** with New Zealand based support
- Group processing sessions for affected teams
- Manager guidance on leading through trauma
- Workplace safety protocols during cognitive impairment period
- Organisational industry specific response framework

The Cost of Getting This Wrong

- Increased safety incidents in following weeks/months
- Staff struggling but not accessing support
- Key employees leaving because they felt unsupported
- Long term damage to team morale and trust
- Potential WorkSafe scrutiny if safety incidents occur

When to Call a Specialist

- **When** the critical incident or death involved traumatic circumstances (suicide, violence, workplace accident)
- You work in a high risk industry where cognitive impairment = safety risk
- Multiple team members are significantly affected
- Management needs guidance on organisational response
- You need guidance on client/stakeholder communications
- EAP is at capacity or staff aren't engaging with it

Crisis response specialist can typically be on-site within 48 hours

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This resource was created by Judi Johnson, a workplace grief specialist providing crisis response to New Zealand organisations following traumatic employee deaths.

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"When a workplace death occurs, organisations need more than individual support - they need expert guidance on protecting their people and their operations during an incredibly vulnerable time."