

Dealing with Critical Incidents in Project Management

by:

Kay Wais

Laura Sherrick

Carrie Baumhover

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Introduction

Various statistics are available on the impact of critical incidents in the workplace. The Grief Recovery Institute reports that approximately 15 million employees are grieving each day in the United States. Grieving employees result in almost \$75 billion a year lost by businesses. Most of these losses are due to:

- Tardiness
- Absenteeism
- Decreased productivity
- Increased accidents
- Increased turnover
- Increased drug and alcohol use
- Lower morale
- Disruptive communication

The National Safe Workplace Institute projects the costs to business at greater than \$4.3 billion annually as the result of loss productivity, worker error, sick time and job related injury due to the traumatic impact from these types of events. Critical incidents at work can include the following:

- Death of an employee off the job
- Death of employee family member
- Workplace violence
- Robberies/crime
- Downsizing/layoffs
- Mergers
- Chronic job related stress
- Inadequate stress management skills
- Natural disasters: fires, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes

Dealing with Critical Incidents

Everly and Mitchell identified seven core components to dealing with critical incidents. While these components are too complex for a Project Manager without specialized crisis training, the core components do provide an overview of stages in dealing with crisis. A basic understanding of the core components may be helpful to a Project Manager or anyone in a leadership position.

THE SEVEN CORE COMPONENTS

(Adapted from: Everly and Mitchell, 1997)

INTERVENTION	TIMING	ACTIVATION	GOALS	FORMAT
1. Pre-crisis preparation	Pre-crisis phase.	Anticipation of Crisis	Set expectations. Improve Coping Stress management.	Group Org.
2. Demobilization & Staff Consult (rescuers); Group Info. Briefing for civilians, schools, businesses.	Post-crisis; or Shift dis-engagement.	Event driven.	To inform, consult. Allow psychological decompression Stress mgmnt.	Large Group Organization
3. Defusing	Post-crisis. (within 12 hrs)	Usually symptom driven	Symptom mitigation. Possible closure. Triage.	Small group.
4. Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD)	Post-crisis. (1 to 7 days)	Usually symptom driven. Can be event driven	Facilitate psychological closure. mitigation. Triage.	Small group.
5. Individual crisis intervention (1:1)	Any time. Anywhere.	Symptom driven	Symptom mitigation. Return to function, if possible. Referral, if needed.	Individual
6. Family CISM; Org. consultation.	Any time.	Either symptom driven or event driven.	Foster support, communications. Symptom mitigation. Closure, if possible. Referral, if needed.	Org.
7. Follow-up; Referral	Any time.	Usually symptom driven	Assess mental status. Access higher level of care.	Individual Family.

[From: Everly, G. & Mitchell, 3. (1997) Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM). A New Era and Standard of Care in Crisis Intervention. Ellicott City, MD: Chevron Publishing.]

Overview

In a sample scenario, a team member has suffered a stroke and died over the weekend. The Project Manager is wondering what she should do.

As is usually the case in managing a project, the project manager has multiple options and multiple risks to consider. The Critical Incident Checklist provided by Flannes and Levin may be helpful for the project manager:

1. Determine whether a CISD should be held for team members.
2. Avoid the temptation to over-promise to team members and stakeholders.
3. Adopt realistic expectations regarding the team members' current ability to perform.
4. Adopt a balanced "yes, but" position with team members to acknowledge the crisis and implications while still focusing on the tasks of the project.
5. Gradually set boundaries and limits with the team that acknowledge the loss and the need to stay focused on tasks.
6. Monitor individual work performance and address possible performance issues.

7. As the aftermath of the critical incident begins to stabilize, determine whether the effect has been sufficiently negative to warrant developing a project recovery strategy, bringing in a project recovery manager, and reassigning the project manager (Flannes and Levin, 150)

Group 2 identified three options for handling the situation.

Option 1, “do nothing” and not specifically address the incident with the team.

Option 2, notify the team but take no other actions.

Option 3, hold a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) session with the team.

Note: A smaller organization might have fewer formal resources available than what is discussed in this paper.

Options for Handling the Critical Incident

Option A – Do Nothing

With Option A, the Project Manager would continue working with the team according to the project plan. The loss is simply an issue for the engineering function of the team. The Project Manager should work with the Engineering staff to find a suitable replacement for the team. The Project Manager is not normally a mental health professional. Therefore, any counseling should be handled by trained professionals and not by the Project Manager. This option may be particularly appropriate if the Project Manager did not know the team member very well.

Impact on the Project Team:

The team members have strong emotional as well as professional ties to the telecommunications engineer. She was a valued asset to the team. This is evidenced because she:

- Worked long hours for months at a time. She had an excessive workload.
- Traveled to other locations even out of state to assist other team members
- Actively mentored junior members of the team. The junior members must have been struggling as they were seeking out the expertise and experience of the engineer.

Work on the project seems to have been difficult with members struggling to meet milestones and objectives. While members may have been working harder and longer the project progress seems to be an ongoing struggle. Not acknowledging the loss for the engineer is likely to induce fear, increase anxiety, and create hostility with the project. It could even dredge up old grievances team members may have with the organization or the project manager. Fear of failure, insecurity, and frustration at not knowing how the team can and should proceed will increase stress and cripple the project.

Option B – Notify the Team

The Project Manager could hold a short meeting early in the day to inform the team members. This would allow the team members to have accurate information rather than hearing about the death through the “grapevine” or reading about it in an electronic communication. The Project Manager would not offer any specific guidance or information on handling the crisis, but would simply provide information to the project team.

The Project Manager should avoid the inclination or pressure to become a counselor (Flannes and Levin, 136). However, there are some non-counseling suggestions that may be helpful for his or her interactions with the traumatized individuals. Sherry Cardinal provides these recommendations in helping people who have gone through a loss:

- Listen carefully.
- Spend time with the traumatized person.
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear if they have not asked for help.
- Give them some private time.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse" - traumatized people are not consoled by those statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and assist them.

Impact on the Project Team:

Again, team members have strong emotional as well as professional ties to the telecommunications engineer. Team members may be grateful for accurate information and that the Project Manager has acknowledged the loss. However, team members may still experience fear, anxiety, and stress about dealing with the loss. There may also be confusion and concern about how the team can and should proceed.

Option C – Hold a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) Session

Faced with the news of the death of a team member, the project manager could choose to hold a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) meeting, or conference call in the situation of a virtual team, with all available project team members. The Project Manager should contact HR to acquire a suitable facilitator for the CISD. This type of session is extremely useful during project work because, by the nature of project work, the loss of a team member will affect all aspects of the project in which the victim was involved. Team members are likely to be traumatized by the loss of a co-worker. They also will be wondering how this loss will impact them personally, the project that they were working on together, and the organization.

This meeting serves multiple purposes for the project team:

1. It will ensure that everybody has heard the news quickly, and from somebody who has the accurate information, instead of through the media or from an outsider. This meeting helps the team members begin to process this information of the traumatic event.
2. It will help determine any actions that the project team can take to assist the dead team member's family and/or dependence.
3. It will provide the project manager with an improved sensitivity to the relationships of the team members.
4. It will allow the project management team to start to assess how the rest of the team's ability to perform may be affected by the incident.
5. It will allow the project management team to acknowledge the importance of grieving and the impact on individuals on the team while balancing that with the importance also for the project to continue successfully.

CISD is a facilitator-led group process conducted soon after a traumatic event with individuals considered to be under stress from trauma exposure. The CISD process normally involves a step process: Introduction; Fact Phase; Thought Phase; Reaction Phase; Symptom Phase; Teaching Phase; and Re-entry Phase. During the group process, participants are encouraged to describe their experience of the incident and its aftermath, followed by a didactic presentation on common stress reactions and stress management. The rationale given for this process is that providing early intervention, involving opportunities for catharsis and to verbalize trauma, structure, group support, and peer support are therapeutic factors leading to recovery (Hiley-Young and Gerrity).

Specific agenda items in the CISD would include:

- Allow the PM to debrief the team on the event
- Then, the CISD trained professional would facilitate the meeting by
 - Allowing each member to react by telling how he/she learned the details of the loss
 - While confirming that participation is voluntary, encourage participation of all team members
 - Facilitate discussion but not push any member
 - Offer information on the natural processes that team members are likely to encounter so they will better understand their reactions
 - Give team member the opportunity to detail memories, make offers of help, or offer suggestions to support the team, members or the family
 - Control individual member participation so no one member monopolizes the meeting
- At the end of the meeting the facilitator will:
 - Summarize the information covered
 - Provide handouts of the information that members can take along as reference
 - Provide information on employee assistance programs
 - Make arrangements of on-site counseling for voluntary meetings.

Team member participation will vary and range from non-involvement to extensive participation. Hiley-Young and Gerrity state that a multitude of factors will influence adoption of the CISD. Factors include:

- The severity of the exposure – how attached the member was to the engineer
- Safety of self and of team members – member who normally work heavy work loads, older works, at risk team member have feel extreme anxiety and fear for themselves
- Characteristics of the recovery environment – if this is a very stressful work environment, member may feel extreme anxiety
- Level of preparedness – an individualized point for each member at which they are either capable or not capable of accepting assistance
- Coping skills before the event – each of us functions individually. Some member are more or less able to adapt then others.
- Vulnerability/resilience.
- Personal history with current and past events - also includes pervious exposure to a similar trauma

Impact on the Team Members:

- Helps educate team members about the events

- Explains the possible and normal reactions to the event
- Offers resources for the team
- Helps to assist in normalizing team member reactions
- Facilitates coping mechanisms
- Also provides a venue to identify team members who may need specialized support to be identified.

The CISD sounds like a useful tool for working through critical incidents. CISD “responds to the need for organizations to address the needs of their workers and to maintain cohesion and morale” (National Center for PTSD Fact Sheet). However, Group 2 identified some specific guidelines for how a CISD should be used.

Participation in the CISD should be voluntary and confidential. As the National Center for PTSD Fact Sheet states, “if individuals are mandated or subtly coerced by their employers to attend a debriefing session it raises the possibility that choice and control are wrested from some traumatized people, which is likely to create frustration, anger, and resentment, as well intensify the experience of victimization.” People cope differently with critical incidents, and certain procedures may be helpful to one person but cause more stress to another person. A person who is reluctant to disclose personal information may feel stigmatized and pressured by the group’s expectations. The sharing of personal experiences in this situation may have harmful, rather than helpful, consequences (National Center for PTSD Fact Sheet).

Project Managers are usually not trained in human resources, mental health, or counseling. Without training, it is not appropriate for a Project Manager to facilitate the CISD. Only someone with training should perform the session. The CISD is primarily an opportunity to educate the team members about common reactions and coping mechanisms, as well as community resources, with any specialized assistance or counseling offered outside of the session (Hiley-Young and Gerrity). The person facilitating the CISD must be selected carefully for their specialized training, as well as familiarity with the organization’s culture (National Center for PTSD Fact Sheet).

Reminding team members of the company resources available, such as counselors or employee assistance programs, is important. Flannes and Levin state that it is common to offer a short handout with information on common reactions and possible recovery steps (Flannes and Levin, 40). If the company does not offer trained counselors who could do the CISD, an untrained person facilitating the meeting could do more harm than good. In that case, it might be better to simply remind team members of the company or community resources that are available. The project manager can listen to team members but is not equipped to offer advice or guidance.

Hiley-Young and Gerrity also discuss the unknowns about CISD. It has not been studied in depth, partially due to challenges in studying these types of situations. The tool was originally developed and used with emergency response teams. Utilizing CISD within organizations is relatively new and has not been studied in detail to assess the effectiveness and risks.

Types of Reactions and Performance Issues

Many reactions have been discussed earlier in the paper. Flannes and Levin identify the following common reactions:

- Emotional reactions: team members may display a variety of emotions including sadness, shock, anxiety, denial, and remorse. Some people will display these feelings immediately, while others will show the feelings after a day or two has passed. Others may display no overt emotion or feeling.
- Behavior related to workplace duties: some team members will talk among themselves for a few hours, with little focus on project work. Other members will ask questions and gather information. Some team members may step forward and volunteer to pick up some of the extra workload.
- Surfacing of old grievances: traumatic events often evoke old issues, angers, emotional injuries, and grievances held by the team members. For example, the death of a team member may prompt a surviving team member to express feelings such as “how the company has always worked people too hard.” Often, the old grievances that surface have no direct connection to the current issue. When these feelings surface, the project manager should work to help the team maintain its focus on the current goals of the project. (Flannes and Levin, 136-137)

The third common reaction listed by Flannes and Levin is particularly appropriate to this situation. The team member had been working long hours for long periods of time and traveling frequently to help team members with difficult projects. It will be easy for other team members, including those that she had mentored, to feel that the company had worked her too hard. As Flannes and Levin state, the Project Manager must be prepared for this and help the team maintain the focus on the goals of the project (Flannes and Levin, 137).

Some team members may offer to pick up additional work when a critical incident occurs. The project manager could talk with team members about their availability and what tasks might be suitable, if a team member offers this support. If some team members are comfortable with continuing on project work, this should be available as an option.

The Project Manager needs to understand and expect that little project work may be accomplished for a few days. An additional recommendation from Group 2 would be to cancel any other planned project meetings for that day. Many team members will want some time to think and talk about the loss of the colleague since many of them knew her well. Team members may not be able to focus well on project work during the first day or so. It is appropriate and necessary to allow them time to handle the loss in their way without pressuring them on project work.

Project work that is accomplished may not be of the highest quality for some time, since team members will be thinking of the critical incident and be less focused. The National Health Organization (NHO) recommends revamping the company leave policy temporarily immediately following critical incident. In the case of a co-workers death, close friends may feel the need to leave the office. This also would apply to the memorial service and/or funeral (Helping Your Workforce).

Carrie shared her personal experience with a critical incident. A team member and personal friend had a stroke at the workplace. Carrie experienced each of these reactions. She was certainly in shock since she had never experienced anything like this before. Carrie was also very anxious and concerned for her team member and friend. For the first several hours following the stroke and transportation to a local hospital, a small group of co-workers simply walked around outside the office building and talked. No one was able to concentrate on work.

As soon as the hospital allowed visitors, many team members left work and went to see the person. Needless to say, very little project work was accomplished for several days.

When the team members are ready to focus on the project again, the Project Manager needs to discuss the status of the project with the team. The entire team needs to work together to do an honest assessment of how the critical incident affected the progress and what recovery is possible or necessary.

Project Recovery Plans

An important step before beginning a recovery plan is to determine whether the project really is in trouble. Even though a project may be trending over budget or past the deadline, it may still be in an acceptable range. For example, many organizations accept a +10% or –10% variance. The cost and effort of a project recovery may not make sense, based on a small variance. It is important to check whether the project is within acceptable tolerances (TenStep).

It is also important to assess the size of the project. Project recovery usually takes additional resource time and adds cost. This may not make sense for a small project. As Mochal's article states, "if a project is small, you are not typically going to go through the effort of a project turnaround". You may also want to think about the stage the project is in. If the project is close to completion, there may not be enough time to do a recovery.

Flannes and Levin recommend that the project manager also assess the team effectiveness and performance. One recommended method for doing this assessment is to request feedback from all team members regarding how the team is functioning as a unit and how individual team members are functioning when working alone.

Flannes and Levin identify four indicators that a project recovery plan is needed:

- The project customer is giving signals of being dissatisfied with the product or service or with project status.
- An excessive amount of project rework is taking place because of poor product quality, team member performance, and technical errors.
- Levels of unacceptable project variance (in the key areas of project time, cost, and technical performance) have become routine.
- Standard project controls are proving unsuccessful. (Flannes and Levin, 141-142)

After determining that a project recovery plan is needed, Mochal identifies the following actions:

- Determine the current state of the troubled project
- Assess the causes of the problems
- Validate the scope of work remaining
- Make recommendations on how to rescue the troubled project by addressing the causes of the original problem
- Validate the cost, effort and duration to complete the project under its original or revised scope
- Gain sponsor approval to proceed (Mochal 2005)

Flannes and Levin identify four steps in a project recovery plan:

- Identify actions or alternatives that will help eliminate the significant variances to project time, cost, and technical performance.
- Execute specific actions or alternatives that may help reduce the project variances.
- Closely monitor the plan against the executed actions and alternatives.
- Control specifications and alternatives designed to reduce unacceptable variances. (Flannes and Levin, 142-143)

Although the first step of identifying actions or alternatives is covered in Mochal's plan, the other three steps identified by Flannes and Levin build on the planning that was done as part of Mochal's plan. Once the actions have been identified, it is important to execute, monitor, and control the work. Recovering troubled project is a project in itself. The work to recover a project has a start and end, resources, and deliverables like a "normal" project. The work begins with a definition and planning process. During initial assessment, it is important to talk to everyone involved in the project. This includes the project team, sponsor, client managers, user, vendors, suppliers, and other third parties that have a high degree of involvement (TenStep). This gives the assessment a more balanced view. It also allows the people involved in the project input into the recovery and makes them more supportive of any plans.

In this specific critical incident, identifying actions and alternative could include:

- Review the progress of the project, the scope, milestones, and progress
- Review schedules and resources for completion
- Review activities to determine requirements. Prioritize tasks to determine the most critical areas of the project impacted by the engineering loss.
- Determine if work can be divided up over several team members
- Contract with outside consultants to handle the engineering work
- Add additional engineering support to the project

The second step of executing specific actions and alternatives might include:

- Hold team member meetings to discuss the project
- Seek out recovery options
- Review project scope
- Determine the costs of taking actions, the impact on the project and the ability to get the project back on track
- Volunteers may surface or other ways found to accomplish some of the activities

Monitoring the plan is the third step. For this critical incident, monitoring could include:

- PM should continue to review the revised scope
- Utilize any documentation reviews available
- Conduct status reviews with team members
- Meet with the customer – especially if the engineer was include in the CSOW or the CWBS. The customer will require assurance that the project will be handled effectively
- Perform technical reviews and audits of project activities

The last step is to create lessons learned. This would include:

- Review of the responsibilities, tasks and activities of the telecommunications engineer
- Information on the engineer's workload
- Documentation of the engineer's travel schedule
- Review of the engineering activities/determination of tasks to be achieved by other personnel
- Documentation of project activities achieved by other team members
- Information of additional staffing, consultants or other support staff
- Recommendations to stabilize the engineering work of the project

Recovery plans vary greatly based on root causes found during assessment. Alternatives and recommendations may include stopping the project, letting the project continue as is, adding resources, paying overtime, or other alternatives. In the article "*40.0 Rescuing Troubled Projects*", TenStep Project Management Solutions offers two good reminders as the recovery is being planned: 1) make sure you understand the tradeoffs of cost, duration, and scope, and 2) look for intervention actions that result in a net savings to the project.

Items to keep in mind during the recovery include:

- Get approval for the recovery plan
- Reset expectations with sponsor, stakeholders.
- Communication is particularly important during project recovery.
- Recovery is the responsibility of project manager and team members, not just the project manager. Team members must inform project manager of new problems and risks, support the project manager in developing and implementing project recovery strategies, and update the project manager on the effectiveness of the recovery strategies (Flannes and Levin, 144).

Linda Lopeke developed a list of reasons why projects fail. The six reasons were not originally created for critical incidents, but certainly apply as the project management team determines how and if to attempt recovery efforts. Even if these signs were not present before the critical incident, the incident may change the environment so much so the signs should be assessed carefully. Risk has certainly increased for the project to experience one of these items:

1. **The Project Manager lacks solid self-esteem.** After a critical incident, the Project Manager may be suffering from remorse and feel responsible for the loss. The Project Manager may feel that they drove the engineer too hard, or should have seen warning signs that the engineer was in trouble.
2. **Team members are disconnected from the project and its objectives.** After a critical incident, they are distracted by the event and cannot get focused on the project.
3. **Planning lacked time and effort in positioning the project for success.** After the critical incident, the Project Manager moved into recovery too rapidly without reviewing all issues, potential risks and options. The Project Manager may also have failed to involve team members in the decision making and plan development and committed to the revised plan without achieving team member buy in.
4. **Communications efforts take a one-size-fits-all approach.** After a critical incident, does the Communications Plan established for the project now work in the recovery phase?

5. **Reporting focuses more on form than substance.** After a critical incident, reports may be based on previous workings for the project which in the recovery plan may have changed. Reporting may also need to be revised now that the team is in recovery mode.
6. **Lack of effort to identify, neutralize or eliminate obstacles.** After a critical incident, the project focus has shifted. Team members may not be reviewing the risks, noting what seems like small events or issues next to the loss of the team member. In reality, events or obstacles may have or currently are occurring in the project which are not being addressed and will impact progress.

There are times when the existing project manager and the project team may be unable to execute the recovery plan. Flannes and Levin, p. 144, suggest that in such a case it may be desirable to appoint a new person to serve as the project recovery manager, and to reassign the project manager to another initiative. The qualities of the project recovery manager should include the following: experience with similar projects, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, customer service skills and focus and active communication skills.

In some cases, all project recovery efforts will fail and the project should be ended. Consider this alternative when the project has become obsolete, the ROI is poor, the project is so far out of control that it cannot be managed, or when resources are better used on other projects. Termination is a valid outcome of a project and should be executed when appropriate.

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