



How to Talk to Your Team About Distressing News Events

By Allison Shapira

How do we manage our teams when a global, geopolitical crisis weighs heavily on our minds? There are atrocities happening throughout the world nearly every day. Unless something has affected us or someone on our team personally, we don't normally start our morning staff meeting with a moment of silence. But when a singular event captures our collective global attention, how do we as leaders and managers address it?

My colleague Jon Haber, a fellow Harvard Kennedy School adjunct lecturer and president of Cascade Strategy, recently shared a thought that deeply resonated with me: "As a leader, anytime you communicate, you are speaking through a megaphone. Our words are actions."

When you are in a position of authority, your words have special weight and you can use them to either foster anxiety or create a supportive culture. But it can be hard to know what to do or what to say. If you're finding yourself at a loss, start with these three simple steps.

1. Check in with your employees individually.

We can't make assumptions about how people are feeling or who in their network is impacted. Talk to your direct reports individually to get a sense of who is affected. Ask if there's anything they need or any way you can support them.

A simple question at the beginning of a one-on-one meeting such as, "Have you been following the news? Do you know anyone affected?" can reveal an unexpected connection that someone might not have thought they could share.

This new HBR article by author Sarah Noll Wilson offers helpful advice for how to handle emotional conversations. "Sometimes people don't know what they need, may be afraid to ask, or are unsure of what options are available to them," she writes. "You might ask, 'Would X be helpful?' Offering a specific way to support them can make it easier for someone to say yes to accepting help."

2. Make space to talk during a meeting.

I remember teaching a workshop for a group of public-school principals a few hours after they had received news that their annual budgets would be reduced, not expanded, in the coming year. To say they were distracted would be an understatement.

If something is weighing heavily on people's minds, your meeting will be ineffective unless you address it. Sometimes we need to start by acknowledging the news and allowing space for people to discuss the issue should they choose to. Once you acknowledge the elephant in the room, you release some of the tension and allow people to focus once again on their work.

Your goal is to be compassionate and understanding, not to wade into politics, put people on the spot, or force anyone to speak. You could start your weekly huddle by saying, "I'd like to take a quick minute to acknowledge what's happening. I've certainly been distracted and concerned by it. Who else feels the same way?"

3. Give people the opportunity to take action.

Many of us feel helpless in the face of a crisis, but there are avenues where we as individuals can collectively make a difference. Research ways to help that are in line with your organization's values, and provide credible sources for employees to get involved. Ask them what organizations they support and let them use a portion of their working hours for volunteer activities. Many organizations are matching their employees' donations to certain relief organizations, which both supports their employees and supports relief efforts.

While we tend to get overwhelmed or paralyzed by options, take one small step and go from there. One of my favorite quotes is by Saint Francis of Assisi: "Start by doing what's necessary, then what's possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible."

Whether it's armed conflict, social unrest, or a natural disaster, geopolitical challenges will not go away. As leaders and managers, we cannot control or solve these challenges, but we can acknowledge that they affect our teams. When we establish a culture of openness and discussion before a crisis hits, we'll have the foundation to support us in the eye of the storm.

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