TRAGEDY ON YOUR TEAM. WHAT HAPPENS AFTERWARDS?

There is no denying that our profession has more than its fair share of inherent risks.

This is absolutely evidenced every day by the dozens, if not hundreds of posts and websites by aspiring and established executive protection professionals throughout the world. This is carried over by individuals as well as agencies and is at the forefront of most advertising in use today.

I touched on the subject at this year's ICON Social Summit, as I stated there, I tend to believe that people in this business believe that the test of leadership comes during the attack on principle (AOP). While there is no denying that leadership is necessary in those key moments of an attack or any other catastrophic event. But as I stated at the Summit, the hardest part of this job is, the after. After the broken bodies are picked up, after the massive losses have been tallied, the worst-case scenario has been addressed and now you are expected to get up and move forward. That to me is when the leadership and the intestinal fortitude demand is at its greatest.

I have been absolutely surprised during the conversations that I have had in the last three months discussing, the after.

The After, people often ask what do I mean by, "what do you do after the attack?". The simple answers I often receive are; we evacuate, we rendezvous to the nearest safe haven, we returned to the residence or the business location. While none of these answers are incorrect. There is a whole depth to what goes on after an attack or catastrophic event that many people and agencies just do not plan for.

Those that have kept up with my articles, consulting or my social media postings know that I am a huge advocate for standardization, having written standard operating procedures (SOP's) and protocols. I fully understand that it is impossible to have an SOP or protocol for every circumstance that will arise, but I have full belief that if you do not have something as a benchmark to start from, then you are flying blind and leave yourself open to horrible failures and huge civil liabilities should the unforeseen or in some circumstances "the expected" happens.

Let's make no mistake we all live in the real world and we know that bad things happen no matter how precise the planning and the execution of our security details are. So the biggest surprise I've had is that very few people have been able to give me credible SOP's in reference to what happens after an AOP or even something like a major motor vehicle accident (MVA).

I find it peculiar that for a profession and professionals, that have no problem talking about the fact that our lives are in fact in danger the majority of the time that we are on assignment and that people will go through extraordinary lengths to brag about their prowess in driving, self-defense, advances, guns et. al.

Very few, outside of government agencies, actually have a standardized and properly implemented system in place for Death and Life-Threatening Injury Notifications. I am genuinely disappointed at how many people I have spoken to over the past three months, who have never even given it serious thought. You would be amazed how many answered, "Well I'll deal with that if it happens." For professionals in the line of work where our advanced planning and training is supposed to be the hallmark of us as individuals and agencies, I amazed at how many do not take the proper time to consider how they are going to handle this extremely delicate part of our jobs and our services.

Let me be very transparent and upfront about this. I believe that any professional that doesn't have a plan, a real written out plan, on exactly who is responsible and for what each person's role is for making a death and/or life-threatening injury notification, is doing him or herself, their team, their client and their agency a huge disservice. Not to mention all the family members that could be touched by such a situation.

It is not within the scope of this article to have a full training module on how to properly set up a notification system and protocol. But I will attempt to cover some of the highlights and hopefully pique your interest enough to get the proper training that is involved. Before anyone states it, I understand completely that quite a few come from law enforcement and military backgrounds and have had to make these next of kin notifications, but let me assure you there is quite a different protocol for civilian-based security operations. Those responsibilities also change depending on your role as a team member, an agency owner, the insurance carrier that you are covered by, and the state or country's laws that you are working under.

Add to this that in the modern workspace; it's not just the news media that we have to outpace. Depending on our role we have to >

reach the family before the bad news slips out by way of mobile phones, social media postings and the Internet. Is this really the time that you want to be trying to figure it out, instead of executing a pre-determined plan?

The principles of death notification:
In person
In time,
In pairs,
In plain language, and with compassion.
The purpose of this information is to help those who must notify survivors of the death or life-threatening injury of a family member or co-worker while at work.

- Death notification is acknowledged to be one of the most difficult tasks faced by professionals, because learning of the death of a loved one often is the most traumatic event in a person's life.

- The moment of notification is one that most people remember very vividly for the rest of their life – with pain and sometimes anger.

- Some survivors hear the news first through the media or a reporter calling, and then have flashbacks to that moment for years. Others tell how they were stunned to hear the person who was killed referred to as "the body" only minutes after the death.

- This information suggests ways to notify survivors effectively and sensitively – including tips on what not to do or say.

- Notification is an important duty. Besides being sensitive, you have to be prepared in case a survivor goes into shock and requires emergency medical treatment.

- The principles described here are simple: Notification should be done in person, in time, in pairs whenever possible, in plain language, and with compassion.

"IN PERSON"

Always make death or life-threatening injury notification in person – not by telephone.

It is very important to provide the survivor(s) with a human presence or "presence of compassion" during an extremely stressful time. The team members who are present can help if the survivor(s) has a dangerous shock reaction – which is not at all uncommon – and you can help the survivor(s) move through this most difficult moment.

Arrange notification in person even if the survivor(s) lives far away.
Contact a corresponding department representative in the survivor's home area to deliver the notification in person. Other options for contact are the Division of Motor Vehicles Enforcement Section, State Highway Patrol or the local law enforcement agency in the area.

"IN TIME" – AND WITH CERTAINTY

Provide notification as soon as possible – but be absolutely sure that there is positive identification of the victim. Notify next of kin and others who live in the same household, including roommates and unmarried partners.

Too many survivors are devastated by learning of the death or life-threatening injury of a loved one from the media. Mistaken notifications also have caused enormous trauma.

Before the notification, move quickly to gather information.
A. Confirm the identity of the deceased or injured employee,
B. Gather details about the circumstances surrounding the death or injury,
C. Determine any health considerations of the person(s) to be notified,
D. Determine if assistance from the clergy, friends or neighbors is needed and make the necessary contacts,
E. Determine which personnel will take part in the notification, and determine if there are personnel who should not take part in the notification, and
F. Determine if other persons are likely to be present at the notification.

"IN PAIRS"

Always try to have two (2) people present to make the notification.
Ideally, the representative making the notification will be an employee of the victim's workplace or other individuals such as a family doctor, clergy or law enforcement official. A female/male team often is advantageous.

Survivors may experience severe emotional or physical reactions. There may be several survivors present. The team can also support each other before and after the notification.

Take separate vehicles if possible.
The team never knows what they will encounter at the location. One of the team members may need to take a survivor to a hospital while the other remains with the other family members. One team member may be able to stay longer to help contact other family or friends for support. Having two vehicles gives you maximum flexibility.
Plan the notification procedure.

Before making the notification, the team should decide who will speak, what will be said, and how much detail will be provided.

"IN PLAIN LANGUAGE"

You should clearly identify yourselves, present any credentials that you may have and ask to talk with the survivor(s) in private.

Do not make the notification at the doorstep. Be sure you are speaking to the right person. Ask to move inside, and get the survivor(s) seated in the privacy of their home. >

Use straight forward and direct language in explaining the reason for the visit.

Survivors are served best by telling them directly what happened.
The presence of the team already has alerted them of a problem.

Inform the survivor(s) of the death, speaking slowly and carefully giving any details that are available. Then, calmly and professionally, answer any questions the survivor(s) may have.

Call the deceased or injured employee by name – rather than "the body" or "he".

Patiently answer any questions about the cause of death, the location of the deceased employee, etc. Offer to gather information about questions you could not answer and get back to the survivor(s) when more information is available, and be sure to follow through.

There are few consoling words that survivors find helpful – but it is always appropriate to say, "I am sorry this happened."

"WITH COMPASSION"

Your presence and compassion are the most important resources you bring to a death notification.

Accept the survivor's emotions and your own. It is better to let a tear fall than to appear cold and unfeeling. Never try to "talk survivors out of their grief" or offer false hope. Be careful not to impose your own religious beliefs.

Many survivors have reported later that statements like these were not helpful to them: "It was God's will," "She led a full life," and "I understand what you are going through" (unless you, indeed, had a similar experience).

Plan to take time to provide information, support, and direction. Never simply notify and leave.
Do not take a victim's personal items with you at the time of notification.

Survivors often need time, even days, before accepting the victim's belongings. Eventually, survivors will want the victim's belongings but allow them to gauge the time. A victim's belongings should be neatly packaged for delivery before presented to the survivors. Inform survivors how to recover items if they are not in your custody.

Offer support and assistance to the survivor(s):
Survivors bear the burden of inevitable responsibilities. You can help them begin to move through the mourning and grieving process by providing immediate assistance in dealing with the death.

Offer to call a friend or family member who will come to support the survivor(s) -- and stay until the support person arrives.

Offer to help contact others who must be notified (until a support person arrives to help with this duty.)

Survivors may have a hard time remembering what is done and said, so write down the names and phone numbers of all who are contacted and the status.

If applicable, inform the survivor(s) of any chance to view the deceased employee.
Offer transportation to the survivors or representative for identification of the deceased employee, if necessary. Explain the condition of the deceased employee, especially if there is trauma, and any restrictions on contact that may apply if there are forensic concerns.

Viewing the deceased loved one should be the survivors choice. Providing accurate information in advance will help survivors make that decision. Some survivors will choose to see the body immediately, and this should be allowed if possible. (Denying access to see the body is not an act of kindness.)

Follow-Up
Always leave names and phone numbers with the survivor(s) so they can contact you for assistance. (Sample form attached – see Notification and Information "Agency Notification Representative")
Plan to make a follow-up contact in person with the survivor(s) the next day.

If the death occurred in another country or state, leave the name and phone number of a contact person at that location.

Most survivors are confused and some might feel abandoned after the initial notification. Many will want clarification or may need more direction on necessary arrangements.

The notification team should be sure they are clear on any follow-up assignments they need to carry out.

There are times that being a leader is not an enviable position in life, but that does not negate the fact that the responsibility is yours and it needs to be executed professionally and respectfully. It is my sincerest desire that this article helps those that may find themselves in this position, to be better prepared and seek the training that is needed to handle these life-changing moments. Like so many of our other skill sets, it is one that I hope you never have to use.

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