The Practice Manager

A NEWSLETTER PROVIDED BY THE LAW PRACTICE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM OF THE STATE BAR OF TEXAS

UPCOMING WEBCAST: THE ETHICS OF LAW FIRM BLOGS

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DISASTER RECOVERY

Gisela B. Bradley

Returning to Your Office After a Disaster

Where, oh where do I begin? This is what many of you will be asking yourself if your office has been struck by a disaster. For purposes of this article disaster is defined as a fire, tornado, flood, hurricane, or other natural occurrence.

If you have never experienced a business disruption of any magnitude, it will be difficult to know where to start. Even if your firm has an emergency response plan, it is not a recovery plan. Recovery is yours, even after the Red Cross serves you food, and you hold your insurance check in hand – it is up to you to get back to some level of normalcy as quickly as possible. Unfortunately you will need to work on recovery and resurrection of your firm as it was – at the same time. Following are some suggestions on how to accomplish that.

At your first visit to your office after the disaster, briefly assess the extent of damage to your property. How much clean up is needed? What type of damage has your office suffered i.e. water, smoke, fire or wind damage? Are the premises usable to an extent that will allow you to begin the clean-up? If so, make sure that you have potable water, sanitary facilities, protective gear such as masks, gloves, boots etc. to protect workers from mold and other toxins. Before you begin any clean-up efforts, take photographs of damaged areas and property, you may need them for insurance purposes later. You may also want to first assign someone to be in charge of the recovery of your practice and

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WEEK OF SEPT. 15, 2008

In this issue:

THE COACH'S CORNER

Debra Bruce, J.D.

Leadership Lessons From Katrina

(reprint from October 2, 2005 issue)

Together Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita brought destruction and chaos to much of the Gulf Coast. In every situation, however, there are lessons and gifts. Here in Houston as a Katrina volunteer at the Astrodome/Reliant Park, I received the gift of watching leadership lessons demonstrated before my eyes.

Usually the impact of our leadership style plays out gradually over time, and we are not able to easily distinguish which variables caused the results we received. In the time-compressed atmosphere of the Katrina relief effort, however, we had the benefit of something like time-lapse photography. We could see strangers form work teams that either dissolved into dysfunction or developed an efficient rhythm despite the rapidly changing environment.

I will briefly describe the leadership keys I observed that worked.

Purpose and Passion

Everyone on the team knew the ultimate purpose of their work: to bring emergency relief and compassionate care to people devastated by a natural disaster. The volunteers all aligned with that purpose, found it meaningful, and felt passionate about it. Their passion and purpose motivated them to work long hours, to do difficult work and even menial or distasteful work willingly and with a sense of fulfillment. For example, on my first day I voluntarily sorted dirty disposable diapers out of a poorly marked container also containing damp dirty clothing in the women's shower area.

Vision and Direction

In this case, leaders didn't have to inspire passion or communicate purpose to the legions of volunteers. They were self-evident. What was not so evident, however, was what needed to be done, by whom, and how to do it. So many volunteers flooded into the Astrodome when

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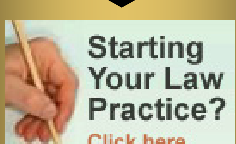

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Katrina survivors arrived that traffic clogged all around. The mass of inexperienced volunteers overwhelmed the workers trained in disaster relief. The survivors' immediate needs of food, water, medical attention and shelter did get met amid the chaos, at least. Over the first few days, leaders with vision emerged among the volunteers, establishing direction for others, who eagerly fell into step. As they shared their visions and established a direction for all that activity, the chaos diminished.

Structure and Communication

Some leaders could see what needed to be accomplished and could point others in that direction. Their newly formed teams worked inefficiently towards the goal, however, because they lacked structure and communication. I watched one team leap forward in productivity when they developed clear structures of responsibility and systems for tracking their progress (instead of everyone just taking on the task they felt like doing in the moment). Their system also included daily training for the regular influx of new volunteers. They still stumbled, however, when one structured department of responsibility didn't know the duties or accomplishments of another.

Even amid high adrenaline urgent activity, they needed to slow down enough to communicate effectively with each other. The team developed a new structure of taking time out for a reporting meeting each morning and each afternoon. In that meeting they learned the needs and accomplishments of each department, and were able to coordinate their efforts. The team leader had the opportunity to acknowledge individual contributions and communicate new initiatives and directions. The team members offered feedback on how the team functions could be performed more effectively. The team leader quickly recognized the benefits of these twice-daily structures for both listening and telling for his fast-paced team.

Empowerment and Strengths

With a clear structure and regular communication, the team began accomplishing many of its daily goals, yet there was still a bottleneck in the overall flow. Every time the team leader walked into the room, people with questions surrounded him. He could not accomplish his own duties to the larger relief effort command center, due to the interruptions. Yet, if he didn't make himself available for questions, his team came to a near standstill.

The team leader recalled how he became a team leader in the first place. He saw a problem and proposed a solution to the leaders he encountered. Their response was, "Sounds like good idea. Run with it," and they turned away to other matters. They didn't try to do it al themselves, and didn't micromanage him. As he demonstrated his capability, those leaders called on him for help, asked for his opinions, and gave him more authority.

The team leader recognized that he himself had become a bottleneck for his team, because he had not adequately empowered his team members to make judgments and take action on their own. He began telling his sub-team leaders to "run with

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someone else to start setting up temporary operations.

The next step would be to take inventory of all your equipment, furniture and fixtures. Determine what is usable and what needs to be replaced. Remember not to plug in any computers or other electronic gadgets if they are wet, as data may be lost or damaged. Examine your files and records (take pictures of destroyed files) and document their condition. This inventory is needed for two purposes: to asses the damage, and to establish how much money is needed to replace unusable items.

If you have lost power, water, telephone or any other utilities, communicate with the landlord or the utility companies to find out when the utilities will be reconnected. Some of the supplies you will need for facility clean-up will be: tarpaulins and plastic sheeting to protect materials from water, to insulate windows, and to cover desks during salvage operations. Interlocking plastic crates to pack materials in, because cardboard boxes will weaken from the moisture in the materials if you had water damage. Generators to power equipment such as emergency lights, air conditioners, fans, etc.; waterproof and grounded heavy duty extension cords for fans and dehumidifiers; washing tanks or large plastic garbage containers, along with sponges, brushes, and hoses to wash materials; freezer paper, wax paper to keep items from adhering to each other in a freezer, and last but not least, cellular or satellite telephones or 'walkie-talkies' to coordinate the process, portable battery operated 2-way radios and petty cash in case the ATM does not work.

While your recovery team is taking care of the impacted location, your organizing team looks after finding temporary space to work out of, and rent needed equipment and furniture, coordinate staff and work schedules, and contacting clients to let them know that you are still in business and how and where you can be contacted.

Contacting your clients is the most crucial aspect of your business continuation. If your clients have been impacted by the disaster as well, they will be happy to hear from you and know that you are concerned about their well-being. At the same time, they can tell you if they have new needs for your services. You will want to get an idea of the work that is coming in, and what kind of cash flow it will create. Prioritize the work to most urgent, somewhat urgent, and can wait a while, until your practice is fully functional again. It is important to know how much money you will need during the recovery period, and knowing what type of work is coming in, will help determine that number.

Technology can play an important role in disaster recovery. The first is to realize that the physical location of your office is no longer as crucial as it once was. You can have several 'virtual' offices to work out of, i.e. associates' homes, secretaries' homes, etc. by utilizing technology to communicate the written and spoken word. You can dictate your work into a telephone and your assistant can email the work product back to you almost as easy as if she/he were sitting outside of your door. If you **See *Disaster Recovery* on page 5**

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it" and even refused to make decisions for some who were reluctant to take the reins.

As his own bottleneck cleared, he occasionally noticed bottlenecks forming down line. Closer scrutiny revealed a new volunteer processing her duties slowly and spasmodically, although the previous volunteer had functioned quickly and efficiently. The team leader paused to ask the new volunteer what kind of work she liked doing, and what she did really well. He encouraged her to capitalize on her strengths, and authorized her to switch roles. By finding a substitute with strengths in the original role, he improved the efficiency of two posts, and the bottleneck disappeared.

Epilogue
In a matter of days, an ever-changing group became an efficient team of 20 people tackling jobs many of them had never done before. The team hummed, even with a 70% weekly turnover rate as volunteers returned to their regular jobs, and new ones filled in. The workers expressed pride and fulfillment in their accomplishments. The team leader completed his service knowing he had just gotten the equivalent of a $10,000 crash course in leadership.

Our Teams
What can we learn from that team leader's experience? If we want our teams to function more efficiently and productively, we can ask ourselves these questions:

Have I clearly communicated a meaningful purpose for our work and inspired my team members to join me in my passion for it?

Do I have a clear vision of where we are trying to go and am I pointing a clear direction to that goal?

Am I willing to ask for the help and wisdom of others?

Do we have a structure that clarifies responsibility and provides systematic opportunities for communication up and down the ladder, as well as across different ladders?

Is every team member in a role that plays to her strengths, and have I fully empowered others to make decisions and take action to the full level of their capability?

With these guides in mind, leading a team can start feeling less like dragging a mule by the harness, and more like lightly flicking the reins to give course direction to a trotting horse.

Debra Bruce (www.lawyer-coach.com) practiced law for 18 years before becoming a professionally trained Executive Coach for lawyers. She is Vice Chair of the Law Practice Management Committee of the State Bar of Texas, and board member and past leader of Houston Coaches Network, the Houston Chapter of the International Coach Federation. She welcomes your questions and comments at debra@lawyer-coach.com.

COMMUNICATING AFTER A DISASTER

BY DAN STEPPICK

If in aftermath of event it is important to maintain appropriate and effective communications with employees, clients, vendors, opposing counsel, the court system and other persons and entities with which the firm interacts.

Client communications:

1. Maintain effective and appropriate communications with clients to reassure them that their files are intact, court dates will not be missed, operations will continue and the firm will survive.
2. Maintain off-site mailing lists so that clients can be notified in writing if possible.
3. Try to contact clients within 48 hours.
4. If possible, develop one appropriate letter for clients so that the firm speaks with one unified and forward-thinking voice.
5. Keep clients posted as firm recovers and/or relocates.

Employee communications:

1. Maintain off-site employee contact and phone list.
2. Immediately notify employees of contingency plans and temporary facilities.
3. Try to keep in communication with employees throughout aftermath in order to maintain morale and preserve relationships with valuable employees.

Court system/opposing counsel:

1. Notify appropriate court systems and opposing counsel of situation as soon as possible.
2. Court system and opposing counsel may provide support or backup in aftermath of event.
3. Cooperate and support other firms affected by events in community. Someday you may be looking for their support.

Public relations:

1. Maintain open and positive communications with press to maintain firm's image.
2. Press may provide opportunities for good advertising and public relations moving forward through feature articles or quotes.

Dan Steppick is a partner in the Denton firm of Shipman Steppick, PC, who practices civil litigation. Mr. Steppick has had first-hand experience in dealing with disaster recovery as his firm at the time was impacted by a devastating Fort Worth tornado several years ago.

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are working out of several locations, plan on having regular conference calls (your telephone company can set that up for you) to promote the feeling of working together. At the same time, if your computers have suffered during the disaster, this may be a good time to upgrade to newer technology for a more efficient practice.

It is possible that you will be in more than one temporary location before your office is settled again in a more permanent facility. It is my opinion that the two most important things in getting back to work as it was before the disaster are to remember - communicating with your staff and communicating with your clients. The first facilitates a quicker return to normal operations by keeping everyone informed of the progress of recovery and the need for all to return to work as quickly as possible, the latter is to assure your clients that you are still there to serve them and that you will continue to provide the same quality work as before.

If you cannot reach your clients, please remember to document every effort you have made to contact them, just as you need to document every step you have taken to get your practice back in operation.

Gisela Bradley is the owner & CEO of Law Practice Management Consulting, a legal practice management consulting firm in Austin (www.lawpracticemanagementconsulting.com). Ms. Bradley is also a former Director of the State Bar's Law Practice Management Program and a current member of the Bar's Law Practice Management Committee.

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