

## LEADERSHIP IN DISASTERS

*This document is a selection of excerpts from an excellent article about leadership in the wake of disaster by Prudence Bushnell, the US Ambassador to Kenya in 1998. The author's intent is to provide leaders with a framework for understanding expectable group responses to human-made disaster, in order to promote effective leadership and management for victims of such tragedies.*

From: Leadership in the wake of disaster — Salient lessons from the Nairobi, Kenya US Embassy Bombing, 1998 — Prudence Bushnell, in *Terrorism and Disaster: Individual and Community Mental Health*, Ed R Ursano, CS Fullerton, AE Norwood, Cambridge University Press, 2003

In a world where disasters, from airplane accidents to terrorist attacks, are increasingly part of our reality, understanding how ordinary people react to extraordinary events becomes more important for effective leadership.

### **In the Immediate Aftermath:**

“Our large and experienced staff needed only minimal direction to put their skills to work in the those first hours. Doing so -doing something, doing anything provided a necessary comfort from feelings of helplessness and despair.”

### **Help can be Resented:**

“In those long hours after the bombing, the victims-turned-rescuers had become a tight, protective, and insular community. As utterly exhausted as we were, we would not relinquish control of what we thought of as ‘our’ tragedy. Former colleagues who had transferred from the embassy to new assignments only weeks earlier returned to help and found themselves treated as outsiders. A phenomenon of ‘We-who-had-endured-the-unthinkable’ and ‘They-who-could-not-understand’ emerged as a part of our culture. As damaged as we were, the need to get back on our feet and take care of our own was insurmountable.”

### **Memorials:**

“No matter how close or how far we had been from

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‘ground zero,’ no one was unaffected.

Solemnly and gently we talked about our 12 fallen American colleagues as the vital, three-dimensional friends they were. The rituals were important, not just to honor and show respect but also to begin resurrecting a community from the remains of what had been blown apart. No matter

what relationships had existed with former colleagues, each death created a void that left us incomplete. Coming together again, even in mourning, was an essential step in re-creating ourselves.”

### **The Post-Rescue Period:**

“In a few weeks, the rescue workers left. Reminders of failure surrounded us.

We dearly missed former colleagues, and even though we greatly appreciated the people who joined us from different parts of the world, it was still difficult to integrate them into the community of bomb victims and survivors. Having initially acted with courage and solidarity, the bomb’s victims moved into another phase. Anger permeated the culture, inside the embassy and out.”

### **Fear, Anger, and Sorrow:**

“The security cordon we had set up immediately after the explosion was seen as an act of hostility, and our focus on saving people in the embassy as a sign of indifference to Kenyan needs. My effort to explain some of our actions by noting the presence of looters in our building enraged Kenyans even further. Some truths, I learned painfully, are best not told. A lingering sense of vulnerability added fear to other emotions. A bomb threat a few weeks after the attack reignited the terror that had already left an imprint on many of us.”

### **Avoiding the Label—Stigma of Mental Health Implications:**

“A few people took advantage of counseling, but most did not. Anything that smacked of mental health assistance offended many -Kenyans and Americans. We did not like being considered ‘sick,’ and we shunned labels as vigorously

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as we rebelled against the thought of references to counseling ending up in our personnel files. Our medical staff, once they saw that people would not be coaxed into coming to them, took to office corridors to reach people where they worked.”

### **Commemorating the Loss:**

“Preparing awards for the traditional biannual ceremony should have been easy, however, Pandora’s box opened. How could we pat ourselves on the back for acts that stemmed from terrible tragedy? How could one action, injury, or sacrifice be compared to another? We finally decided to establish arbitrary, defensible criteria to the selections, to forego any remuneration, and to focus the award ceremony on a dedication of the memorial fountain at my residence. As people in Oklahoma City have noted, there is no closure. There is, however, a possibility to move on as time helps knit memories and after-effects into one’s life.”

### **Taking Care of Our People in Nairobi Taught Me the Following:**

- “Remember you are dealing with a process, not an event;
- Recreate normalcy, even if an illusion, and tolerate diminished results;
- Redirect priorities, set and celebrate achievable goals, however small;
- Use rituals to allow individuals a chance to heal within the embrace of community; Resurrect community, carefully integrating those who replace absent colleagues and tending to the families of those who were lost;
- Beware the ‘we’ and ‘they’ phenomenon and try not to get sucked in;
- Pay attention to behavioral cues and reach out;
- Hold yourself to the tone and behaviors you seek in others;
- Listen, if you want to be heard;
- Take care of yourself, if you want to take care of your people.”