



Key Considerations When Building a Family Assistance Team



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"This is what you do for a living? Why on earth would you subject yourself to this over and over again?"

Those two questions came out of the blue and up until that moment our taxicab ride had been mostly in silence, with the two of us gazing out of our respective windows entrenched in our own thoughts. Her questions, let alone the sound of her voice breaking the monotony of road noise, brought me out of my internal thoughts quickly. But before I could muster a response, she turned her head in my direction and added, "But I'm glad you do."

That day was a difficult day among a string of such days for her. The sadness and exhaustion was evident in her eyes, words and gestures. I felt sorry for her. She had lost a close family member in an aircraft accident, and a colleague and I were assigned to provide her with Family Assistance in the aftermath.

Even though she had only known me for a few days, she shared details of her life with her loved one. She showed me photos and told me the stories behind each one. With that sort of candidness, you cannot help but assimilate yourself. I started to feel - even with such limited scope—her loss.

Make no mistake: this was her loss, not mine. The best way to assist her was to have presence, demonstrate compassion, communicate information in a timely and forthright manner, and help her connect to the needed resources at the appropriate times. If I delivered my objectives effectively, I would perhaps ease some of her burdens—or perhaps provide some sense of direction in the midst of the chaos.

The ability to demonstrate compassion and support without becoming overly entrenched in the loss suffered by the person we are assisting is an important skill that Family Assistance Team Members must master. On paper, the ideal candidate's behavioral traits look easy to identify: compassionate, emotionally mature, an effective communicator, and so forth. But the reality is



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that the Family Assistance Team Members experience intense moments, stressful days and an ever-changing list of priorities when they are responding to an accident. This work is not for everyone.

If you are tasked with building a Family Assistance Team for your organization, there are some important factors to consider:

Team Size

Ideally a ratio of at least two team members per family is appropriate. Additional team members should be added for larger families.

Volunteerism

Soliciting for volunteers within your ranks generally results in a more engaged and focused team. Training is more effective, ongoing interest and support is strong, and the likelihood of each individual's willing participation in a real event is higher. On the other hand, requiring employees to be team members may mean that individuals are not well suited for the job or simply not capable of performing such duties. This can harm your organization and may place response efforts at risk.

Other Critical Job Functions

The very essence of Family Assistance is providing dedicated support to each family after an accident. There are many people in your organization that will have critical roles in supporting other functions. It would be a challenge for those individuals to meet the daily needs of the family in a timely manner while juggling other response or work activities beyond Family Assistance. Use caution when resourcing your team from workgroups and positions that may have other roles in the accident response effort or in business continuity.

Skill Sets

Many employees are not cut out for this type of assignment. It is important to understand that it takes a unique personality with strong interpersonal communication skills to fulfill this role on even a one-time basis.

Availability

Can your Team Member travel on short notice? Be away from work and home for two weeks? The effort and time that you will invest in attracting, selecting and training new members for your team is all for naught if you are selecting people who have very limited availability.

Aircraft operations are around the clock and around the globe. The chance of an accident occurring after normal business hours and far from home base is real. Potential team members



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need to understand that they could be called upon to perform their duties at any time, travel will be a given, and their hours will be extended and non-traditional.

Emotional State

In our personal lives, we occasionally suffer losses, illnesses, and many more stressful situations. Plan to provide your team members with the flexibility to temporarily "opt out" of participation if they are currently experiencing such challenges.

This is a short-list of factors to consider as you design and build your team. There are many more to add to the list, and a significant proportion of those may be determined by the unique needs of your organization. Do not underestimate the importance of supporting the family members and friends. Providing compassionate support and sympathy on your organization's behalf is not admission of guilt - rather it is the right and caring thing to do. Providing well-planned and executed family assistance should be the cornerstone of your post-accident activities. This will help your organization build credibility with the affected family members and friends and will also help reinforce your culture at every level.



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