

Managing High Risk Assignments What Managers Can Do to Help

Journalists are extraordinarily resilient. Most come through difficult, dangerous assignments very well. Good management goes a long way toward preventing problems down the road. Below are some things to keep in mind to support people assigned to high-risk assignments.

Pre-Departure and Post-Assignment Briefings

When you know someone is going on a high-risk or very intense assignment, make available to them a **pre-departure briefing** to develop practical strategies for anticipating and dealing with the kinds of hardship, conflicts, traumatic events, ongoing family issues that often accompany difficult assignments. They will also receive suggestions for maximizing their energy and personal well being during the assignment.

Upon return home, it is recommended they receive a **post-assignment briefing** for the individual and family members designed to defuse any tough experiences, provide information and support for making the transition back home and into another assignment.

Communication with Staff Member on Assignment

Give your full attention to the staff member who is calling in. She will know if you're distracted. He'll "feel" it during the conversation. Remember that office dramas and demands usually pale when compared with the actual life and death dramas in which the correspondent may find himself.

Perhaps the single most important thing for a correspondent is the person on the other end of the phone line. They need to know you're listening, focusing on them, there to help them make good decisions. Be honest. Be supportive. Ask how you can help, and then do it.

Know what time it is when you call someone half the world away. Think about the fact that they might be sleeping (or need to be), or that your call is coming first thing in the morning, or last thing at night, or immediately after they've just been informed that their lede was completely re-written, or that someone they've worked with has just been hurt.

Some of this stuff may seem obvious, but ask anyone who's been in the field. They'll tell you horror stories about the person on the other end of the phone line, someone who couldn't bother an editor because they were in a meeting. Or one who fretted about all the problems here at home, when the staff member is phoning in from a battlefield.

Logistics

On top of having a high risk assignment, being in an environment devoid of sanitation, food, place to sleep and other life necessities (e.g., New Orleans), adds greatly to the risks of the assignment. Assure them that you are doing everything you can to help, and then do it. If, at the end of the day they know an RV will be there, it makes all the difference.

The “Never Let Them See Me Sweat” Culture

Some people believe that complaints about hardship will jeopardize their career. These folks need permission from you to do things that will reduce their stress (e.g., come out for a brief period, be with colleagues, take a shower, attend a post assignment briefing).

Give Control

Do it wherever you can (ex., being in dangerous place and someone on desk sending you on “foolish assignments...”not listening to you.”). When you are in danger, taking control where you can is a stress reducer. As an editor, listen to your correspondent.

After a traumatic incident in the field

Talking about the experience may be the most beneficial thing someone who has been through a terrible incident can do: talking to you, talking to other staffers, talking to colleagues in the field. Make those conversations happen.

It’s essential that editors make contact with anyone on their staff who’s been through a distressing experience. This is good management, but is especially important in the aftermath of trauma. Public recognition for someone’s hard work and professional achievement can similarly have much more profound meaning than at ordinary times.

A month or so later, it’s important to make individual contact again with those who endured a difficult experience. Check how they’re doing and what support they may still need. Listen to what they have to say.

Sleep

Sleep is often in short supply on these assignments and this is often unavoidable. Inquire about this with your correspondent and plan when to talk and how often, and at what times of the day (when you can) so that the needs of the desk can be met without *unnecessarily* interrupting sleep.

Maintaining Contact with Employee’s Family During an Assignment

Some families are old hands at this, just as their correspondent family members are. Others are terrified first-timers. Some people (single staffers, say with parents several states away) do not want their families to know they are going into a traumatic situation because it will worry them too much. Managers need to be sensitive to these issues and facilitate communication when needed.

Ease the Transition Home

Following a particularly difficult assignment, it is not suggested the person return directly to their family or to the office unless they absolutely must. A break of a few days or a week, preferably not alone, for decompressing is recommended. Longer breaks might be indicated in special situations. If the staff member has been reporting from a war zone, for example, it might be helpful to unwind in Paris or London for a couple of days on the way home.

Welcome Back

Once you know the staffer's return date, e-mail key people on other desks with the date of return, urging them to personally welcome your colleague back. A personal thank you from senior management is always appreciated. When someone has been off covering a war for months at a time, then suddenly shows up, unannounced, in the office—it's incongruous, weird. When you can, let people know exactly when the staff member will return to work. That way, others can make a point of welcoming them back, know when to expect them and be sure to say something.

Be Aware of Delayed Processing

It is often not until the person returns home or a few months later that they become aware of the enormity of what they have been through. This is normal and most likely will pass.

What's the Next Assignment?

Some correspondents feel that they ought to be able to jump right back into the daily routine, as soon as they get back, or right into another dangerous situation in another part of the world, perhaps because things are busy, or they feel that they will let the paper down if they don't offer to take on another difficult job: Managers must assess whether a staffer's eagerness to jump into another assignment is a wise idea, for the person or the newspaper.

When to ask for help

It is normal to have a range of symptoms after experiencing a traumatic event. Most reactions resolve over a month or so, but others may need special assistance. If someone does not seem to be herself, the work is suffering, or you have concerns about an individual, reach out to an experienced professional to discuss the situation and resources available to you and your people.