

Attacks: How Companies Have Managed the Aftermath

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While some companies adopted a bedside manner to support their employees who wanted to express what they were feeling in the aftermath of the November 13 attacks, for others it was business as usual. And, that left some people shocked.

When Laura* heard terrorist attacks were taking place in Paris on November 13, she immediately got in touch with her family, friends and coworkers. They all told her they were safe, so she was reassured. Over the weekend, the young woman regularly checked her e-mail and cellphone, expecting to get a message from her company, which generally doesn't hesitate to contact her during her time off. The company's offices are located in Paris, and most of her team, forty or so people, well over half of whom are in their 30s, live or often spend time in the neighborhoods targeted by the terrorists. But, her company's management didn't say a word.

"A callous reaction"

Like many people in France, on Monday morning most of the employees of the small company where Laura works were "distressed" and wanted to discuss the deadly attacks and the terrorist threat or at least get together to talk and reflect. One of them was particularly upset because he had a ticket for the Bataclan, but at the last minute didn't go. Spontaneously, the employees decided to bring up the subject with their managers. Out of their depth? Too uncomfortable? Management deemed the minute of silence planned for noon Monday "unnecessary." Worse, they turned down a request from staff who wanted to talk about the events. Their reason: work is not the place to discuss "religion" or "politics." A "callous" remark. Some employees were incredulous, Laura said. "We're not robots. We work long hours together. The lack of compassion is very disturbing. What would they have done if one of our employees had died in the attacks?" she asks.

>> See: Where to Find Psychological Support in Paris and Outside?

Solidarity and empathy

Not all companies had this attitude. On the contrary, many were quick to reach out in the aftermath of the attacks, whether by social media, text messages or e-mail, or by setting up psychological support teams. Some did so as early as Friday night to make sure their employees were safe. Management at numerous companies were anxious to convey their empathy and solidarity with the victims of the deadly attacks, either by e-mail or voice message. Amazon's employees in France received e-mail from their American boss, Jeff Bezos. Other large corporations, including BNP Paribas, Allianz, Axa and Société Générale, expressed their support on social media or through messages on their sites.

Microsoft President and CEO Satya Nadella was in this group. "I'm deeply saddened by the news coming out of Paris," he wrote. "My feelings and thoughts are with you, especially after the time we spent together this past week." Nadella was in the French capital to meet with his teams last week.

At Microsoft, a range of measures were taken to provide employee support. First, working from home was encouraged on Monday. For those who did go into work, the minute of silence was respected. The company also took steps to ease the burden on its users who might directly or indirectly be affected by the terrorist attacks, whether they were French or had ties to France. Skype calls to and from France have been free since Saturday.

Furthermore, to respect the three days of national mourning, the U.S. multinational decided to suspend its advertising campaigns for the launch of its new tablet, the Surface Pro 4. All these initiatives reflect a coordinated response.

>> How to Heal the Psychological Wounds of the Attacks

A civic duty

CGI, a Canadian IT services company with 65,000 employees worldwide, including 10,000 in France, activated its “standard” crisis management process, with a dedicated team meeting to organize “employee support and assistance” initiatives early Monday. On the weekend, employees living near the attack sites in and around Paris received text messages asking them if they were safe and well. Some had been at the Stade de France stadium or the Bataclan, where attacks took place, but no victims were reported. The company still sent an e-mail to its French employees to tell them that the services of a “psychological support team” were available to them 24 hours a day.

“Maybe it’s not the role of a conventional company,” acknowledged Audrey Le Carour, communications director at **CGI** for France, Luxembourg and Morocco. “But, this is an exceptional situation. We wanted to do something concrete to show that we care. It was our moral responsibility. We saw it as a civic duty.”

On Sunday, Jean-Michel Baticle, President of **CGI**’s operations in France, Luxembourg and Morocco, sent an e-mail to all the company’s employees in France. On Monday, staff received a message of support from the company’s senior management in Canada. One upset employee complained to management that the messages were too “impersonal.” But, others considered them to be “comforting” and “positive.” They felt they had some support in these very trying circumstances. It shows that companies clearly have cards to play in moments like this.