

Guidance for Managers of Staff in Isolated and Hazardous Situations

About this resource

When armed conflict occurs in an area where staff are providing services, staff can become cut off from internet/telephone service and may not be able to evacuate. Sometimes staff are unable to return home safely. In these situations, they may shelter in place or continue to deliver services as best as possible.

In such situations it is difficult or impossible for staff to access staff support functions such as counseling. As such, we have developed this resource for managers of staff who find themselves in these types of isolated and hazardous situations. This resource can be downloaded (when possible), provided in hard copy, or recorded and sent as audio files that can be accessed if/when communications permit.

Who is this resource for?

Managers of staff working in active conflict zones who are cut off from communications and travel routes.

What is in this resource?

This resource provides information on supporting the wellbeing of staff in isolated and hazardous situations. It explores:

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Making value-judgements and other guidance on approaching these situations

Managers play a vital role in shaping how staff experience and respond to events. When you are the manager of staff members who find themselves in isolated and hazardous situations, your role is critical. However, it can be very difficult to know what to do and say as a manager when this occurs.

How can you best support and guide your staff during this time? What principles and values can you draw upon to help guide decision-making?

This question about principles and values is important to consider. You should review your organization's Code of Conduct and any existing Duty of Care statement about staff wellbeing your organization has adopted.

Most humanitarian and development organizations focus primarily on supporting the wellbeing of community members and other beneficiaries. But when do NGO staff matter more than programs? How should a manager *also* seek to support and protect staff wellbeing, especially when those staff are in isolated and hazardous situations?

One of the best ways you can support staff in isolated and hazardous situations is to send clear messages that they have permission (or are being explicitly instructed) to prioritize their own safety and wellbeing.

You must make these messages extra-clear to your staff because the mission of your organization likely focuses so heavily on serving others. The determination and dedication of staff members working in this industry means that staff are usually prepared to make sacrifices and face significant risks to do their work. Most staff have a very strong inclination towards service, and a strong work ethic. When these staff find themselves in isolated and hazardous situations, they can feel driven or compelled to continue to prioritize work and service opportunities at the expense of their own (and others') safety and wellbeing.

The question of what is an acceptable level of risk for staff members to face during the course of their work is very complex, and there are no simple answers that will apply in every situation. Your organization has hired you as a manager and leader and making difficult decisions in complex situations can be part of that job. Often, judgements about what to do next will need to be made on a case-by-case basis.

These sorts of decisions are sometimes called "value-judgements" because they are informed by what is most being valued at that time. When your staff are facing extra difficulties and risk, consider how the organization's Code of Conduct and your own values might apply.

You can encourage staff to protect and support their own wellbeing complicated and dangerous situations by saying things such as:

- *Our people (staff) matter more than programs*
- *Your safety is my (and the organization's) top priority in this situation*
- *No life should be put at risk to protect assets*

In addition, you can support staff wellbeing by seeking to support basic needs. Refer to the pyramid of staff wellbeing priorities in hazardous situations (below) and explore ways to support those needs. This may include doing things like:

- Support or encourage staff to focus on meeting their needs for temporary housing, food, and other basic needs.
- Facilitating connections with family (e.g. if the office has a satellite phone, perhaps allow staff members to make a one-minute call every two days to their families to let their families know they are okay).
- Facilitating connections between colleagues (e.g. creating opportunities for affected colleagues to regularly share with each other how they are feeling and opportunities for them to give and receive support from each other).



Also locate and review the following resources as you prepare to make decisions and communicate with your staff in upcoming days:

- *Manager Guidance: Ensuring Staff Care During Evacuation or Shelter In Place Orders*

The next section of this resource offers tips for managing staff who are present with you in a hazardous situation. The last section shares tips for remotely managing staff who are isolated in hazardous situations.

Managing staff who are present with you in a hazardous situation

Becoming isolated in a hazardous situation during the course of your work is very stressful. If you are also the manager of one or more other staff members who are present with you, then you have additional responsibilities and challenges in this difficult situation. You must consider how to support your own wellbeing *and* the wellbeing of your staff.

If you find yourself isolated in a hazardous situation with your team, refer to the pyramid of staff wellbeing priorities in hazardous situations. If you can, provide your staff with a copy of the companion guidance note for staff in isolated and hazardous situations, and take action as best you can to:

1. Meet physiological needs for water, food, shelter, and sleep
2. Promote a sense of safety and calm
3. Promote a sense of connection and belonging.

Here are specific things you can say and do to support your staff during this time:

1. **Update your staff:** Tell the staff present with you as much as you can about what has happened and what may happen next. Tell them that you will continue to update them as soon as new information arises. Uncertainty is very stressful. Anything you can do to reasonably reduce uncertainty and keep your staff informed and updated will help them feel calmer and more in control.
2. **Remind staff that their safety is a high priority:** Tell your staff that their safety is the highest priority in this situation. Tell them that you and the organization do not expect them to put their safety and lives at additional risk.
3. **Acknowledge that the situation is stressful and scary:** Remind staff that it is normal to experience a variety of strong emotions and reactions during times like these (e.g., feeling very anxious, having trouble sleeping, difficult concentrating, and feeling irritable and angry).

4. **Remind staff that you have all gotten through challenging situations before:** Remind staff that you have all faced big challenges and difficult times in the past. You have coped with these sorts of situations because of skills and resources like faith, good problem solving, patience, compassion, teamwork, and staying calm. These are exactly the sorts of skills and resources that will also help now.
5. **Tell staff your personal priority in this situation is to support them, and that you want them to support each other:** Tell staff that you care about their wellbeing. You want to do everything you can to support them in this situation, and you expect them to also care for each other and to join together for strength and support.
6. **Discuss what (if any) services you and the team will continue to deliver in the current situation:** If you are isolated without clear guidance (or if instructions you receive from leadership who are based remotely do not appear sensible given conditions on the ground) then ultimate responsibility for deciding what to do next lies with you. Discuss your thoughts about next steps with your staff. Ask them to share any hesitations, concerns, or other ideas they may have.
7. **Remind staff again that their safety is a priority:** In discussions about any service delivery remind staff again that their safety is a priority. Reassure staff that they do not have to participate in service delivery in the current situation. Remind staff that there will be no shortage of humanitarian needs to meet after the current crisis has passed and the risk has lessened. Encourage staff to take care of themselves now so that they are able to take care of others later.
8. **Repeat key messages and information:** Repeat key messages and information to make sure everyone has heard and understood them. When people are highly stressed it becomes very difficult to concentrate. It is very easy to miss (or misunderstand) things that are said.
9. **Tell staff that they should expect things to change quickly:** Remind staff that the situation could change suddenly and that any plans you have made may need to be revisited and changed. You may even need to (or decide to) evacuate as soon as that becomes possible, or leadership may be in contact with additional instructions.
10. **Set up regular (daily, if possible) gathering times:** Set up a specific time each day for staff to meet. These gatherings can serve multiple purposes. Ensure that you create some time during these daily gatherings to share feelings and give and receive support.
11. **Invite people to seek you out:** Tell staff that they can come and talk to you or ask you questions at any time.
12. **Thank and affirm staff:** Thank your team for their calm, patience, and courage. Tell them that you wish that current events were not unfolding as they are, but that you are grateful for their presence and their teamwork.

If possible, provide all staff with copies of the following resources:

- *Guidance Note for Staff Isolated In Hazardous Conditions* (to all staff and managers)
- *Staying Calm In An Emergency* (to all staff and managers)
- *Self-Care During Mandatory Evacuation* (to all staff and managers)
- This guidance note for managers of staff in isolated or hazardous conditions (to any managers of other staff)

Remotely managing staff who are isolated in a hazardous situation

If you are managing staff in a hazardous situation and communications have been cut off, there are still some important things you can do to support the wellbeing of your staff. These include:

1. **Learn what you can about the current situation:** Learn what you can about the current situation, security, and who is responsible for decision-making related to continuing organizational presence and activities in the area, so that you can provide a clear update to staff once communications are re-established.
2. **Connect with the immediate family of staff members who have become isolated:** Contact the immediate family of every staff member who is isolated to share what you know, reassure them, and update them on any actions the organization is taking.
3. **Establish a schedule of routine updates to the family:** If the family knows they will receive regular updates, it can help to reduce stress for the family and assist in building goodwill and engagement in the work of your organization. Keep a record of dates and times you called the family.

If and when communications are re-established, here are some things you can do and say to support your staff who are isolated in a hazardous situation:

1. **Ask what they are seeing, hearing, and doing:** Ask them to share everything they can about the current conditions. What are they seeing, hearing, and doing?
2. **Ask what urgent needs and questions they have:** What are their most urgent needs and questions? Ask specifically about housing, food, and other practical needs.
3. **Ask if there is anything they want communicated to their family members at this time.** Tell them anything that the organization is doing to connect with and support their family members. If they are not able to contact family themselves, ask if there is anything they would like you to communicate to their family members.

- 4. Update them:** Tell them what you have heard and learned about the situation and what may happen next.
- 5. Share anything specific you can do/authorize in response to their needs or questions:** If there are urgent needs you can help meet, do so.
- 6. Tell them that staff safety and wellbeing is the priority:** Communicate that staff safety and wellbeing is the priority in the current situation and that you want them to make decisions that protect safety and support the wellbeing of themselves and colleagues.
- 7. Reduce work-related pressure:** Do what you can to reduce work-related demands and pressures that your staff may be feeling. (For example, if there are any "normal work" deadlines for reporting or financial acquittals, do everything you can to officially pause those deadlines. It may seem obvious to you that staff on the ground should not be worrying about settling their cash advance with Finance team right now, but staff on the ground may fear that they are failing to demonstrate accountability and are at risk of losing their job if they do not comply with Finance requirements.)
- 8. Explain what priorities, values, and information are informing decision-making by leadership:** Explain what priorities and values are informing decision-making, and who is making decisions. For example, you may tell them that staff safety is the highest priority in the current situation and that organization is currently planning for all staff to evacuate the area as soon as travel routes are judged to be safe enough. Explain who will make the decision about travel routes, and where they are getting their information from.
- 9. Establish a regular communication schedule:** Establish a regular communication schedule. For example, ask them to contact you at noon every day, communications permitting.
- 10. Tell them you will keep them updated:** Tell them that you will continue to update them as soon as new information arises.
- 11. Tell them anything specific you want them to know/remember if communications are cut off:** Share anything you want them to remember if communications are cut off. Empower them to make decisions and take action as best they can according to the information they have on the ground.
- 12. Thank and affirm staff:** Thank your staff for their calm, patience, and courage. Tell them that you wish that current events were not unfolding as they are, but that you're grateful for their patience and their teamwork.

Access permitting, send the following Guidance Notes:

- *Guidance Note For Staff Isolated In Hazardous Conditions* (to all staff and managers)
- This guidance note for managers of staff in isolated or hazardous conditions (to any managers of other staff)

- *Staying Calm In An Emergency* (to all staff and managers)
- *Self-Care During Mandatory Evacuation* (to all staff and managers)
- *Manager Guidance: Ensuring Staff Care During Evacuation or Shelter In Place Orders* (to any managers of other staff)