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5 Things Leaders Often Get Wrong in the First 24hrs

(and what psychologically safe leadership looks like)

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Why the first 24hrs matter

The early response shapes trust, clarity and the quality of information that follows. Even experienced leaders feel pressure, and that pressure can lead to decisions which are later regretted.

Mistake 1: Jumping to conclusions

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The urge to ‘explain’ what happened is strong. But early assumptions close down learning and can unintentionally influence the investigation.

Psychologically safe alternative:

Pause. Gather facts. Communicate uncertainty with clarity.

Mistake 2: Not leading with a humane response

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People need calmness, compassion and reassurance before they need process.

Psychologically safe alternative:

Acknowledge impact. Offer support. Set a steady tone.

Mistake 3: Delaying early contact with partners and insurers

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Support is most effective when it’s brought in early. Waiting can cause unnecessary complexity later.

Psychologically safe alternative:

Engage key partners and insurers promptly and transparently.

Mistake 4: Failing to delegate specific points of contact

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Each ‘layer’ of the organisation needs to know who to direct queries, concerns or developments with. Without clarity on who this is, information gets lost, anxiety escalates and speculation fills the gaps.

Psychologically safe alternative:

Have a delegated point of contact at leadership and management levels and ensure they are fully supported with the resources they need, including communication out to relevant teams.

Mistake 5: Focusing on individual actions instead of systems and context

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Most incidents are shaped by context, pressure and conditions, not one person's behaviour.

Psychologically safe alternative:

Ensure the investigation has the freedom and breadth to review systems, processes and contributing factors. Communicate this widely, even if all the answers aren't known yet.

Why this matters

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When leaders respond well in the first 24 hours, organisations gain:

- Better information
- Stronger staff engagement
- Reduced risk
- More robust learning
- A safer culture overall

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If you're strengthening your organisation's approach to serious incidents, my e-brochure explores how Applied Candour supports investigations, training and governance systems: Link to E-Brochure