



HELPING YOUR TEAM RECOVER FROM THE DEATH OF AN EMPLOYEE

During the course of a career, a manager goes through a wide range of situations, challenges, and crises. Sadly, the death of an employee is sometimes included.

A work group is like an extended family. Co-workers can spend more time with each other than with their own family members. So when someone in the “family” dies—from whatever cause—co-workers grieve. Understanding the process of grief can help you take care of yourself and your team during this tough time.

Grief after a loss

All of us grieve after a personal loss—it’s a normal, common experience. It is also always a process, which can include some—or all—of these responses:

- Numbness or denial
- Sadness
- Distress and anger
- Guilt
- Worry
- Depression
- Loneliness
- Physical signs (fatigue, upset stomach, trouble sleeping, problems focusing)

Each person in your group, yourself included, will react to the news and the grieving process in a unique way. There is no “right” or “wrong” response, but everyone will be affected. Thankfully there are some steps you can take during this time.

Communication

To onsite workers: Quickly breaking the news of the person’s death is a critical first step. You may want to call the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for help in planning this meeting. This may be the first time you are challenged with such an issue. But, EAP staff members regularly consult about the death of employees.

If you can, hold the meeting in a private room. Since such startling news may not sink in right away for some, you may need to repeat yourself. Be patient and plan for silences, emotional responses

and questions. You may not be able to answer all questions, but promise to find out the information. Listen to what your workers say without judgment and with compassion. Share your own feelings as well.

To those away from the workplace: Don't forget those who are not there that day. Calling them one at a time will help each one feel part of the work group.

To those in the rest of the company: Work with your manager or human resources staff to inform the broader employee group of the person's death.

To the family: Before your first announcement to staff, ask the family members what specific facts about the person's death can be shared. Also ask for news about the funeral arrangements, if the family is open to colleagues attending.

Opportunities to grieve

Funeral/memorial service—If possible, give staff paid time off to go to the funeral or memorial service. If everyone wishes to take part, make arrangements for temporary coverage.

Other memorial activities—Some may want to prepare a memorial to give to the family, in the form of a board, video, or book. Or they may want to plant trees in the person's name. Supporting such actions shows your concern and lets people use their creativity as an outlet to grieve.

Returning to balance

The loss of a team member often takes a short-term toll on workers and their productivity. Acknowledging the effects of grief and communicating respect and compassion are useful strategies for helping the team return to productivity. Keeping your door open to employees to talk privately is also helpful. You can't manage away the grief of your team members, but you can set up a workplace setting in which work gets done while they progress through the grieving process.

The length and extent of the grief experience will be different for each person. However, some people can go through a harder grief process that upsets their normal functioning, including their ability to work effectively over a period of time. Examples of such problems are increased absenteeism, mistakes, lowered productivity, emotional outbursts and relationship troubles. If you note that a team member's job performance suffers in such a way, call the EAP to talk about the best ways to help.

Employee assistance program

You can ask that an EAP professional meet with your group to talk about the loss of their co-worker and the grief process. Should you have concerns about the actions of a certain person or need help dealing with your own reactions, you can also call the EAP for a management consultation.

Don't underestimate the toll that your employee's death can take on you. Be mindful of getting plenty of rest, nourishment, and support from your family and friends. You can't be an effective manager without caring for yourself.

Resource

National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization

Grief in the Workplace: Helping Employees Cope After a Critical Incident

www.caringinfo.org/files/public/brochures/HelpingEmployeesCope.pdf

By Cynthia Sulaski, M.S.W., C.E.A.P.

Looking for additional support? Contact us today.

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