

Grief in the Workplace

A Manager's Guide

Here are some general guidelines for managers to help with grief in the workplace:

Stay in charge. Let employees know that you are concerned and doing all you can to help. You represent the organization to your staff, and your caring presence can mean a great deal in helping them feel supported. You do not have to say anything profound; just be there, do your best to manage, and let your employees know you are concerned about them. Increase visibility and take time to ask folks how they are doing. Try to keep other official business from pulling you out of your work area for long periods of time.

Share information with your employees as soon as you have it available and give them time to grieve. Do not be afraid to say, "I don't know." Particularly in the first few hours after a tragedy, information will be scarce and much in demand. If you can be an advocate in obtaining it, you will help lessen anxiety. Allow staff time to attend the funeral and help them with coverage logistics.

Ask for support from higher management. Relief from deadlines and practical help such as temporary employees to lighten burden of administrative work can make it easier for you to focus on helping your employees and your organization return to normal functioning.

Don't "keep a stiff upper lip" or advise anybody else to do so. Let people know, in whatever way is natural for you, that you are feeling grief, shock, anger, or whatever your natural reaction may be to the situation. This shows your employees you care about them. Since you also can function rationally in spite of your strong feelings, they know that they can do likewise.

Encourage employees to talk about their grief. This is hard to do, but helps with healing as people express their painful thoughts and feelings in a safe environment and come to realize that their reactions are normal and shared by others. Your group may prefer to discuss the situation among themselves. Some groups may want to have an outside facilitator to help them discuss their reactions. Don't be afraid to participate and to set a positive example by discussing your own feelings openly. Your example says more than your words.

Be aware of the healing value of work. Getting back to the daily routine can be a comforting experience, and most people can work productively while still dealing with grief and trauma. However, the process of getting a staff back to work is one which must be approached with great care and sensitivity. In particular, if a colleague has died or been seriously injured, the process must be handled in a way that shows appropriate respect for all concerned.

Be aware that the death may affect employee productivity and motivation. When a coworker dies, the work world is suddenly out of our control. "It can't happen to me" just happened to the person in the next office. Expect some loss of productivity, motivation, and mistakes, especially from people close to the deceased. Some staff may request time off whereas others may prefer to work. Respect individual differences.

Pay attention to co-workers' reactions to the person's replacement. The new employee may face resentment, anger and a lack of cooperation from coworkers that have nothing to do with abilities or work style but a lot to do with grieving over the previous staff member. Acknowledging that this is the case can help alleviate tensions.

Set an example. Many people are often afraid to say the "wrong thing," or are so fearful of death that they shy away from someone who has suffered a loss. A personal call or note from you is appropriate to express condolences, as are office-wide flowers or a card.

Ask for support. The Faculty and Employee Assistance Program (FEAP) is available to offer professional assistance to groups and individuals affected by trauma. Encourage your employees to take advantage of FEAP. FEAP can also provide information about other grief resources.

You can contact the FEAP at 434-243-2643 or <http://uvafeap.com>

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