

## The Manager's Role with Grief

Every workplace must deal with the complexities of individuals and their personal lives. Grief is a normal and natural response to loss, which affects millions of individuals each year, most of whom are trying to remain productive employees during the process. Colleagues want to be supportive but aren't sure what to say or do while managers and employees may feel pressured and anxious knowing that work must still get done.

As a manager, there can be a very challenging line to walk. When a co-worker or employee is grieving, when there is serious illness, or when an employee dies, the needs of the workplace and the needs of affected workers may conflict. Also, the manager may have his or her own feelings of grief to address while trying to make tough decisions about still getting the work done.

Suggestions to consider:

### *When an Employee is Grieving*

If the employee is gone for an extended period, remember to stay in touch and support the employee's self-care.

Ask the employee if they would like you, or someone else, to share information with others.

Ask what the employee needs when they return to work, i.e., questions about their grief process or more focus on the work, a place for privacy during the day, help in keeping up with their work, etc. These needs may change rapidly and the employee may not know what they need ahead of time. It's helpful to keep checking in. Keep in mind as you check in that the employee will be grieving no matter what level of support and comfort is offered at work.

Expect the best from a grieving employee but accept less than the best for a period of time.

Acknowledge the loss and the grief. There is no right thing to say. The wrong thing is to say nothing.

It's okay to set limits. If an employee is spending a great deal of time talking about the deceased or their grief, there are ways to be supportive but also suggest other professional resources.

### *When an Employee is Seriously Ill*

Clarify with the employee what information can be shared and what needs to remain confidential.

Identify a contact person to keep co-workers current while also encouraging messages of support. Ask the ill employee if phone calls are valued or if they would prefer cards.

Offer help in working with human resources around leave usage, disability information, or relevant paperwork.

If an employee's illness is terminal, consider having an Employee Assistance Program staff person join a staff meeting to facilitate co-workers talking about their reactions to the illness.

### *When an Employee Dies*

The death of a co-worker can be felt on many levels, depending on the range of relationships with the person who has died. For many, it generates feelings associated with other deaths in their life and also may generate strong emotions or anxiety related to their own mortality.

Many times, individuals are not used to having strong emotional reactions at work and there may be discomfort with tears and sadness.

It is important to share news of the death with all employees as soon as possible. When information is available, let everyone know of visitation or funeral arrangements.

It is very helpful to offer a grief group in the workplace, facilitated by an EAP counselor. Attendance is voluntary and gives employees a structured time and place to share reactions, emotions and questions.

Let employees know there will be hard and painful times such as cleaning out the deceased employee's locker, work area or office, responding to their workload, needing to make future hiring decisions. Remind staff that it is no reflection on the value of the late employee or how much they are missed. The work process needs to continue.

Consider ways to honor and remember the deceased such as a charitable donation, a lunch to share memories and celebrate the individual, planting a tree in their memory, etc.

Take care of yourself during this time. It's hard to be a leader when one has their own grief and often there may not be previous experience in how to handle the situation.