How to manage employees who are grieving

When an employee experiences the death of a family member or close friend, it’s tempting for supervisors to take a hands-off approach to the employee’s grief.

Maybe the manager feels uncomfortable, wants to avoid inadvertent insensitivity ... or just doesn’t know what to say.

However, silently waiting for the employee’s emotional recovery isn’t the best strategy. It can lead to reduced morale, reduced productivity and employees feeling that their managers don’t care about them as people.

Effective supervisors understand that grief is a mental health issue that must be gently confronted. Take the following four steps to sensitively manage grieving employees and their impact on co-workers.

**After learning of the loss**

Immediately show genuine sympathy and support. Don’t discuss job responsibilities; it can be perceived as insensitive and increase emotional distress.

Gently ask the following: “What would you like me to tell co-workers?” “Will you call to let me know how you are doing?”

Understand the organization’s bereavement leave policy and communicate it to the employee. If necessary, suggest the employee talk to the HR department and, if necessary, fill out any appropriate forms.

*Note:* The federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) allows eligible employees to take job-protected leave to care for a seriously ill spouse, parent or child. FMLA leave does not cover leave for time spent in bereavement or wrapping up the affairs of someone who dies. Again, check with HR about the policy.

**During bereavement leave**

Serve as a liaison between grieving employees and co-workers. Periodically ask, “What would you like me to tell co-workers who are concerned about you?”

Coordinate requests, such as having people send flowers or contribute to a charitable foundation. Managers should send their own sympathy card or note, separate from the staff.

Instead of flowers, supervisors sometimes send books on how to deal with grief. Good titles: *The Healing Journey Through Grief* (Rich); *The Grief Recovery Handbook* (James, Friedman); and *Healing Grief at Work* (Wolfelt).

**Upon returning to work**

Meet with the employee. Ask whether there is anything the person wants to discuss about the recent experience or returning to work. Offer reminders about company programs available to support employees dealing with a loss.
Remember that grieving employees carry emotional pain that lasts for several weeks or months. They will experience all or many of the typical stages of grief (see below).

**During the ensuing weeks**

Meet with the employee periodically. Watch for drastic behavior changes and displays of grief. For example, it’s natural for grieving employees to talk about deceased loved ones and post pictures.

But suppose an employee talks very frequently about the loss to the point of distraction. Your approach? Avoid insensitivity. Don’t tell the employee to talk less about the deceased or remove memorabilia from the desk.

Instead, suggest that the employee meet with HR to discuss ways to obtain support for dealing with grief. Also remind co-workers to be patient with employees who have a particularly tough time handling grief.

**Final tip:** Treat all grieving employees the same to avoid the perception of favoritism or discrimination.

**The 5 stages of grief**

1. **Denial.** “This can’t be happening to me.”
2. **Anger.** “Why is this happening? Who is to blame?”
3. **Bargaining.** “Make this not happen, and in return I will ___.”
4. **Depression.** “I’m too sad to do anything.”
5. **Acceptance.** “I’m at peace with what happened.”

*Source: On Death and Dying, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.*

**Case study: Creating an employee 'grief group'**

At the SAS Institute in Cary, N.C., when an employee dies, the company employs a social worker who convenes a “grief group” to allow co-workers to come together for support and ask questions. In such groups, the employees typically want to talk about hard things like the replacement of the deceased worker, who’s going to absorb the person’s duties for now and what to do about his or her workspace.

The company suggests these tips for supervisors organizing grief groups:

- The immediate supervisor of the deceased employee should decide whether to organize a grief group.
- Convene the group within several days after the death. The day it happens, employees might be in shock. They will respond better to the group a day or two later.
- Address concerns about how to talk to employees whose spouses or children have died, whether it’s OK to cry in front of a grieving colleague, and why a co-worker’s loss conjures up sadness over long-ago losses.
- Help employees devise an activity to honor their grieving or deceased colleague, like planting a tree or creating a memorial web site.