

How to manage grieving staff: Compassion, not silence

✘ The coronavirus pandemic has pushed fear, anxiety and worry to the forefront of your employees' minds. And, in some cases, employees are experiencing 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 and viewing grief as a "problem to be solved" isn't the right strategy. Silence will only lead to damaged morale, reduced productivity and employees feeling that their managers don't care about them as people.

In fact, according to a 2019 study by the Grief Recovery Institute, 85% of workers said grief hurt their productivity and decision-making abilities at work. And a new WebMD study said that 57% of Americans have grieved the loss of someone within the past three years.

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

After learning of the loss

It's perfectly OK for managers to embrace their own discomfort and say something like, *"I have no idea what to say to you and I'm really sorry this happened to you."* Simply acknowledging the loss with genuine sympathy and support is what matters, not the specific words.

Don't discuss job responsibilities; it can be perceived as insensitive and increase emotional distress.

Gently ask the employee: *"What can I do to help you?"* and *"What would you like me to tell co-workers?"*

This initial step can be a lifeline for employees dealing with the emotional and physical effects of grief, and it opens an opportunity for the employee to take the lead in asking what they need.

It's also important for managers to understand the organization's bereavement leave policy and communicate it to the employee. If necessary, suggest the employee talk to the HR department or 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 company 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. Expect to do more listening than talking. Patience, compassion and availability are helpful qualities to demonstrate.

Offer reminders about company programs available to support employees after a loss.

Remember that the grieving process is different for everyone. Employees can carry emotional pain that lasts for several weeks or months, and they'll experience some or all of the typical stages of grief (see *box*). It's the manager's job to create an accepting environment where grief is normal but work still gets done.

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, especially during holidays and anniversaries.

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: Whatever you do to recognize an employee's loss, do the same for all of your staff. It's important to avoid any appearance of favoritism or discrimination in this especially difficult time.