

Recovering from the Death of a Co-worker – A Manager's Role

The death of a co-worker is a painful experience under any circumstances, and all the more difficult if it is unexpected. Recovery of individuals and of your work group itself depends to a great extent on the effectiveness of leadership provided by the manager. Effective grief management assists members of the department as they mourn and memorialize their deceased co-worker, help their families, and return to effective performance of their work tasks. The following guidelines have proven helpful:

Provide A Private Area Where Co-Workers Can Mourn Without Public Scrutiny.

Initially, close friends and associates will feel shock and intense grief. If the loss is to be processed, it is essential for all affected employees to spend time talking about the deceased co-worker, sharing memories, and discussing the loss. This "grief work," which is essential for recovery, is intensely painful when done alone, but much less so when it can be shared with friends. Providing a private area where co-workers can talk together and shed tears without public scrutiny will ease this process.

Share Information. Employees will feel a particularly strong need for information at this time. Managers can show their concern by making a concerted effort to get that information, and share it in a timely manner. *Until you get the information, simply admitting honestly that you don't know is more comforting to employees than not being told anything.*

Contact Employees Who Are Temporarily Away From the Office. Ordinarily, people in a small department are aware of friendship patterns, and will take steps to ensure that those in particular need of comfort are given support. However, problems may occur if co-workers are on leave or travel. The manager may need to reach out to those temporarily away from the office to make sure they don't get left out of the notification, resources, and grieving process.

Contact the University's Internal Employee Assistance Program – the Center for Work and Family Life (CWFL). Your employee assistance professionals are trained mental health professionals who can assist with many of the questions both you and your employees will have around coping with the death of a co-worker. Often, a cohesive work group can go through the grief process without help. However, if members do not know each other well, or for whatever reason have difficulty talking, a mental health professional may need to come in and facilitate a meeting in which grief is discussed. This gives you, as the manager, an opportunity to be a part of the group who has lost a co-worker and receive support. Group members can be reminded by professionals from CWFL that normal grieving can produce upsetting responses such as sleeplessness, diminished appetite, and intrusive thoughts of the deceased. Ordinarily, these will subside with time, particularly if the individual receives strong group support. However, some individuals may find these reactions especially troubling or long lasting, and may need to turn to the CWFL staff for assistance in processing their grief and loss.

Serve As A Role Model. Managers need to serve as role models for appropriate grieving. If you show that you are actively grieving, but still able to function effectively, other employees will realize that they can also be sad without losing their ability to perform their duties rationally. You

should avoid hiding your own feelings, as this often leads employees to misperceive you as not caring.

Consider Holding A Memorial Service, Especially If Co-Workers Cannot Attend The Funeral. A memorial service can be very helpful and is often a turning point in restoring a work group to normal productivity. This is not to imply that the deceased is forgotten; rather people find after a point that they can continue to work while grieving.

Reach Out To Family Members. Reaching out to the family of the deceased can be comforting for both employees and family members. Attending the funeral service, sending cards, visiting the bereaved family and offering various forms of help are all positive healing activities.

Support Informal Rituals. Informal rituals in the office can ease healing. A group of friends might join together to clean out the deceased person's desk, or organize a campaign for contributions to an appropriate charity. Sometimes employees may want to leave a particular work station or piece of equipment unused for a time in memory of the deceased. If possible, this wish should be honored.

Get Back To The Work Routine In A Way That Shows Respect For The Deceased. Returning to the work routine can facilitate healing if the work group makes an effort to uphold values held by the deceased and strive toward goals that he/she particularly valued, for example, "*I want to show the customers I care, because Sam was such a caring person.*"

Don't Treat A New Employee Like A "Replacement" For The Employee Who Died. It is important that new employees not be made to feel like "replacements" for employees who have passed away. Reorganizing responsibilities and moving furniture can help spare the new employee and others the painful experience of having somebody new at "Sam's desk" doing "Sam's job."

For more information on coping with grief and loss and supporting one another, contact the Center for Work and Family Life at 213-821-0800 or visit them at www.usc.edu/worklife.