

# Recovering from the Death of a Coworker

The death of a coworker is a painful experience under any circumstances, and all the more difficult if it was unexpected. Recovery of individuals and of your team itself depends to a great extent on the effectiveness of the grief leadership provided by you—the team's manager. Effective grief leadership guides members of the team as they mourn and memorialize the dead, help their families and return to effective performance of their duties.

The following guidelines have proved helpful.

## **Provide a private area where coworkers can mourn without public scrutiny.**

Initially, close friends and associates will feel shock and intense grief. If the loss is to be resolved, it is essential for all affected employees to spend time talking about the deceased person, 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 coworkers 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 concerned 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 team 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 coworkers are on leave or travel. The manager and team members may need to reach out to those temporarily away from the office to make sure they don't get left out of the grieving process.

## **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 also can 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 offering a debriefing.**

Sometimes, a cohesive team 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 professional person may need to come in and facilitate a debriefing or meeting in which grief is discussed.

## **Consider holding a memorial service, especially if coworkers cannot attend the funeral.**

A memorial service can be very helpful and often is 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.

Consider the following points in planning a memorial service:

- The memorial service should honor the deceased and provide an opportunity to say goodbye. Unlike a funeral, a memorial is not a religious service, and should be suitable for employees of all faiths. Friends may speak about the qualities they admired in the deceased, the person's contributions to the work and the morale of the group. Poetry or music reminiscent of the deceased might be shared.
- The most common mistake in planning memorials is to plan them at too high a level. Senior officials may want to take charge, to show that they care and to assure a polished product. This approach usually backfires, for example, "The managers don't care about Sam; they just want to put on a show for the executives."
- Memorial services are most effective when the closest associates of the deceased are given key roles in planning and carrying them out. Including the right people (in other words, the best friends of the deceased) makes the service more comforting for everyone. If the best friends are too upset to speak, they can take nonverbal roles such as handing out programs.

## **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 team makes an effort to uphold values held by the deceased and strive toward goals that he or 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.**

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."

## **Remind employees about the services of the employee assistance program (EAP).**

Team members should be reminded 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 an employee assistance program for professional help.

U.S. Office of Personnel Management. (1993, December). Recovering from the death of a coworker (Chapter 3). In *A Manager's Handbook: Handling Traumatic Events* (OWR-15). Retrieved January 11, 2019, from <https://www.opm.gov>

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