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Employees often grappling with grief

Workplace can be welcome oasis for employees struggling with loss of loved one

By Melissa Mancini

Jackie Parker had been vice-president of professional services at Research in Motion (RIM) for a mere five months when tragedy struck her family — her son died.

“Shortly after I joined the organization, in quite a senior and visible role, I became known sort of less for why I was there and more for the loss of my son,” said Parker, who lives in Orton, Ont.

Parker’s son Dana was on a “dream vacation” with her younger son Morgan in Costa Rica. Both had just graduated from school and worked hard to save up money for their trip. Morgan returned to Canada earlier than his brother to start his job search while Dana stayed with friends.

In the early hours of March 7, four days after he turned 24, Dana was riding in a truck with a group of friends. The driver hit a soft patch of dirt on the road and the truck went off the road and flipped.

Dana was the only person injured in the crash. He spent five days in a hospital in Costa Rica on life support in critical condition. He never regained consciousness.

The days she spent in Costa Rica with her son and the funeral arrangements that followed are a blur for Parker. She still has trouble putting her finger on exactly how many days she was away from the office but estimates it was anywhere from three weeks to one month.

Parker said she made the decision to go back to work because she knew, inherently, if she didn’t go back to work, she wasn’t going to make it.

“It was a turning point for me that made the difference between whether I would make it or not — and I really mean make it or not,” she said.

Work was the only normal thing left in her life, said Parker.

“I had to do it and I don’t think I really knew what I was getting into at the time.”

Workplace, responsibilities not specifically grief-related

It’s not an uncommon reaction. When Brenda Marshall interviewed senior-level employees who had gone through the death of someone close to them, they all wanted to return to work after the death.

“Being at work was an opportunity to think about things and to be involved in something that wasn’t specifically grief-related,” said Marshall, founder of the Solacium Group, a company that assists individuals and organizations dealing with and managing the impact of grief on the workplace.

Prior to her return, Parker had a conference call with her boss, the head of HR and an HR professional she knew well.

“For me, it was so settling to know that I had these people,” she said.

While they were on the call, somebody asked the question: “What do you need?” said Parker.

Asking grieving employees, especially senior leaders, what they need and offering options for accommodation is better than making the decision for them, said Marshall.

“I think the first (thing) is to have the conversation with the person and I think a lot of companies don’t do that.”

Some grieving executives may benefit from flexibility, a mentor or different work options. But the key is to ask the

griever what they need, not to tell them, said Marshall, who founded the Solacium Group after her younger brother died in 2006 while she was working as a consultant at a mid-sized company.

The experience of grief is individual and the accommodations a grieving worker will need should also be an individual decision. One strategy companies might try when a grieving boss returns is to prepare his team on how to help upon his return and offer some grief education to the team, said Marshall.

At RIM, Parker requested a grief counsellor for the people on her team. Anyone was free to see the counsellor to help them deal with how they were feeling and prepare them for what it would be like to interact with their grieving boss.

"You are a little bit of a freak when you have this kind of loss, people are so horrified — especially people who are parents," she said.

When Parker returned, many people told her they had seen the counsellor. Some called or sent cards because, they told her later, they didn't know how to act around her.

"What they were telling me was that it helped them so much to have the grief counsellors because they said they did not know what to do," she said. "And the fact that I was a vice-president didn't help that for them."

The last thing an employee wanted to do was cry in front of a vice-president, said Parker.

In her first week back, Parker remembers the HR professional she was close with seemed to pop in at the most appropriate times to check on her.

"And she did that for at least a year," she said. "That was a really major thing... She really wanted to make sure that I was OK as a person."

Communication is key, said Marshall — having someone who is comfortable talking to the person about what he's going through is important.

"I would say that's the worst thing, is to say nothing," she said.

Parker agreed. There were people who handled the situation very well but there were also people who were awkward around her and, worse, there were some who acted like nothing happened, she said.

"There was the odd time where if I was shaky and someone brought it up, I would tear up and feel like I'm going to break down, but it was much worse when people knew and they didn't bring it up."

It's important for co-workers to allow those who are grieving to talk about their experiences, said Dawn *Cruchet, a grief counsellor and educator based in Montreal.*

"You can't make the griever any more upset than they are already upset," she said. "And so I think it's OK to say, 'I'm sorry to hear your mom died.'"

In her time leading bereavement groups and counselling those going through grief individually, Cruchet said she has learned griever's need to talk.

"People need to tell their stories over and over again but often people don't want to listen because of their own discomfort."

Co-workers and HR professionals don't always have to search for the perfect thing to say, just be sympathetic.

When Parker speaks to groups about grieving, she tells people they don't have to relate the pain the griever is feeling to something in their own lives, even though people may feel compelled to do so.

Sometimes this just ends up being inappropriate, she said.

"Please try and refrain from making statements like this: 'I know how you feel. I lost my dog,'" said Parker.

“Oftentimes, people will do better if they can just sit with you in the moment.”

But it’s alright for people to tell the bereaved person they don’t know what to say, she said. “And silence is OK.”

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