

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Coping with grief in the workplace

Helping employees ease back into work

By Brenda Marshall

Sept. 15, 2006. I remember this day so well. In the morning, I facilitated a leadership program for a new client — it went really well. Afterward, I shared a quick coffee with a colleague and then returned to my office where I scanned through my email. And then came the frantic call. For the next 24 hours, I sat vigil in a hospital watching my younger brother cling to life. He died the next morning.

As per company policy, I had three days to bury my brother, sort through family affairs and pull myself together. Only I couldn't. So I used my last remaining vacation days to have a little more time off. And then I was back at work — trying to function “normally” in a very abnormal situation.

My colleagues didn't know what to say or do. My grief was a dark cloud over our team and I struggled with parts of my role. It was just so difficult — and continued to be for a long time.

Versions of my story play out across organizations every day. Grief is a normal reaction to loss — with cognitive, emotional, social and physical impacts. And even though 100 per cent of us will experience loss, most of us have had

little formal education or training about grief. For the most part, what we know is informed by myths that continue to circulate in popular media.

As a result, when grief enters a workplace, people are fearful and often frozen. “I'm afraid I'll make it worse” is something I hear so often. The good news is there are very simple strategies organizations can implement that will make a tremendous difference for the individual and the people around him.

Educate: There are no stages of grief — this is probably the single biggest misconception that exists today. Grief is a very individual experience, with no right or wrong, and it will not unfold in the linear fashion we've come to believe exists. There is no magic number of days someone will grieve, nor is there an invisible line people cross to become suddenly fine. Instead, we are more likely to see a gradual re-orientation to the world as the individual learns to cope with her loss. There are lots of ups and downs, and in the workplace, it is totally normal to see varied engagement and productivity for a long time.

Fortunately, about 80 per cent of people “accommodate” their loss without clinical intervention, according to the 2009 study *Grief*

Therapy: Evidence of Efficacy and Emerging Directions by Robert Neimeyer and Joseph Currier — meaning they figure out how to go on with their lives in the absence of their loved one. It doesn't mean they stop feeling sad, but with the support of their workplace, friends and community, they will find their way.

Simply providing employees with education about what grief is and what it isn't will make a big difference in how they respond and react to a colleague. And how a team supports the individual will have a tremendous impact on his ability to return to productivity.

Accommodate: This doesn't need to be complicated or expensive. It begins with communication and finding ways to help an individual continue to “opt in” to the workplace. The grieving employee's boss or leader is a key player in making this happen and HR professionals can play a big role in helping her make good choices from the start.

First, encourage the leader to connect with the individual before she returns to work and ask two simple questions:

- “What would you like your first day back to look like?” Maybe she'd like to spend her day sitting quietly at her desk getting caught up on email. Or perhaps she'd like

to have a team meeting — and talk to everyone about her situation — just so she can limit ongoing questions. As one manager said to me, “I wanted to gather everyone together, tell them what happened (her sister was a victim of crime) and do it just that once.” Once the leader knows what the individual needs, he can plan that first day.

- “Would you like someone to walk into the office with you?” People who are grieving often worry about breaking down as they enter their workplace that first time. Having someone with them provides quiet support and a buffer should someone innocently ask, “Hey, where have you been?”

By engaging in this conversation upfront, a leader can identify what the employee needs as the days unfold. Once back, regular check-ins where the leader specifically asks, “What is going OK in your role? What are you finding more difficult?” open the door to creating accommodations specific for this person.

And these are likely to change over time. Perhaps they need permission to use a private office if they become emotional at work. Maybe flexible hours would help. A newly widowed employee now needs to figure out school drop-offs and pick-

ups in the absence of a partner. Or perhaps some parts of his job are just too difficult right now.

As one executive shared with me, “For the first few months after my son died, I just couldn’t handle customer escalation calls.” Another found concentration difficult. If you create a forum for an open conversation about these normal reactions to loss, you can work with the individual to make some temporary shifts that will allow her to contribute. For many people, work is the only place where life feels a little normal so anything you can do help them stay connected will be so appreciated by the individual.

Support: “Support the supporters” is something I always suggest

to companies. Check in with the people around the individual. Some of them may be carrying a heavier workload as they pick up extra tasks and responsibilities. Others may fall into the role of “gatekeepers.” One executive assistant told me she felt she had to take care of her grieving boss — and did so by limiting the number of issues that were raised to her level. Still others may find listening to their colleague’s sadness very difficult.

If leaders show support for the team, they will be better-equipped to support their colleague and that will help the overall team functioning immensely. Just asking how they are doing demonstrates concern and understanding that they too are

playing an important role for their grieving colleague.

Empathy: Think about empathy in the long term. This may mean checking in with the grieving mom as her first Mother’s Day approaches. It may mean being sensitive about upcoming holiday events. One grieving leader worried he might become emotional as he stood in the receiving line greeting employees at the holiday party. He wanted to perform his role but didn’t know how so he enlisted the support of another member of the executive team to stand beside him giving him an “out” if needed.

HR leaders can play a huge role by encouraging this kind of dialogue and solution-finding. The key is to

gently inquire — and let the individual come up with a solution that works for her. Just by asking, you’ve demonstrated care and concern that will stay with them always.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting a grieving employee. However, by following a few simple principles, HR can raise the collective knowledge of all employees, and be better-positioned to help the next person who needs support.

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