

When Grief Comes to the Workplace

Even though most working people spend more time on the job than with family or friends, we like to believe that the workplace should be unaffected by “personal” issues and concerns. This assumption is challenged when death casts its long shadow over the workplace. When a fellow employee is diagnosed with a life-threatening or terminal illness it becomes hard to keep the focus on business. At first, co-workers who are eager to provide support of any kind take on added work responsibilities; over time, the anxiety and worry for the colleague may be compounded by guilt and resentment over the ongoing disruptions to workflow. Legal obligations related to privacy may limit what can be shared with associates, leaving some questions and concerns unanswered.

Death may enter the workplace in a variety of guises- as the expected end of a terminal illness, through a sudden, unanticipated medical crisis or accident or through some type of violence. Whatever the cause, the death of a co-worker can leave associates shaken and the workplace awash with grief. Associates struggle to gain understanding of what happened, and are often uncertain as to how to support families that may be known to them only through the deceased colleague. The empty space in a work group impacted by death is likely to be felt long after a replacement worker is hired. Work groups struggle with the challenge of “how to remember” while maintaining attention and focus on the “business at hand”.

When a colleague loses a spouse, a parent or a child, managers and co-workers are often uncertain as to how to provide meaningful but non-intrusive support. Upon returning to work, the bereaved worker may likewise struggle to “look normal” when their internal world is anything but normal. Just as the loss of a loved one impacts the functioning of individuals and families, businesses and organizations will feel the impact of grief on organizational functioning.

Being prepared for the inevitability of workplace grief can go a long way toward minimizing the disruptive aspects of grief. Having workplace procedures in place that address communication issues related to information about health status, family needs or requests, hospital or home visitation, details related to the death and funeral arrangements can minimize the negative impacts of the “grapevine. Communication needs to include external business associates who may have had a close business relationship with the deceased. A statement from top management acknowledging regret over the loss of an employee is important for the employee’s co-workers as well as for surviving family members. Identifying someone to coordinate support efforts, such as meal delivery, transportation, monetary donations will minimize unnecessary duplication of effort. When managers know what to expect and how to respond, employees feel validated and supported and, in turn, they are able to effectively support one another in the grief process while moving forward with the business at hand.

Pathways of Hope bereavement services support not only individuals and family members affected by life-changing loss, but also organizations challenged by workplace grief. Services to organizations include workplace grief support and education, management consultation on grief related issues, grief education materials, and the availability of individual bereavement counseling services for bereaved employees. All services are available at no charge due to the generous support of individual and community donors. For further information or to request support for your organization, please call Pathways of Hope at (937) 258-4991.

