

# Supervisors can help ease employees' grief

Mourning doesn't have to be an awkward topic. Supervisors can understand what an employee is going through and help. They can be patient when the employee is forgetful and kind when they may cry. Their sensitivity to what the employee is going through allows him/her to continue at his/her job and bring the employee back to full throttle.

Even as companies nationwide bend over backward to help employees manage their family and personal lives, dealing with grieving employees remains among the most avoided workplace topics. If you've ever found yourself turning down a hall and going the other way to dodge someone who is grieving, you're not alone.

## Costly Blunders

Why do we have so much trouble comforting colleagues who have suffered a loss? One reason is we are afraid of death, and when it touches a colleague, it is a reminder of our own mortality. Because death is such a taboo subject, we are not sure what to say when we are faced with a grieving person. Coworkers who will freely discuss intimate relationships become tongue-tied for fear of saying the wrong thing.

So, they do nothing. And, sadly, this is the worst choice, because it sends a message that they don't care. Imagine how you would feel if your parent died, and nobody at the office where you have worked for years said anything about the loss.

Blunders such as these are costly, personally and professionally. It's particularly important that supervisors are knowledgeable about the grief process and show sensitivity and compassion for the bereaved. Most workers feel that bosses, rather than a company policy, set the tone for a workplace response to grief.

Here are some key points for supervisors:

- **Communicate:** Notifying staff is critical. Managers who learn about a death in a coworker's family should ask permission to notify colleagues and of any information the family wishes to disclose (passing along the importance of resisting the urge to probe for details). You may want to designate a person to disseminate information about memorial services. Why should you avoid leaving notification to the grapevine? Picture this lunchroom scene: A person tells a colleague who has been off on maternity leave, "So show us the baby pictures" - only to learn that there are none, the newborn died.
- **Acknowledge the loss:** It is important to personally acknowledge the death has occurred. This can be a simple "I'm sorry," a handwritten note on a desk or flowers. It shows you care about your colleague as a person. Also,

permit coworkers to attend the funeral, organize whatever company support is available and arrange for flowers or other appropriate acknowledgement from the office as a whole. These gestures are never forgotten.

- **Understand grief:** Supervisors tend to impose unspoken deadlines for healing. But it's important to understand that grief is rarely neat and tidy. Be patient and give your colleague the time needed to get better. Understanding that a colleague will experience the stages of grief - denial, anger, depression, bargaining and acceptance - will help in finding ways to be supportive. Remember that returning to work doesn't mean the grieving process is over. We all grieve in our own way, in our own time. Grief over the loss of a loved one can hit with such staggering force that the ability to work is altered for months or years. In some cases, a grieving worker may find solace in returning to work and appear almost normal for a while, only to fall deeper into grief months later.
- **Be flexible:** Communicate with team members about what has happened and figure out ways to share the load until the grieving person returns to full strength. A supervisor may get the team together and explain the need to compensate for a member who is grieving, to be sensitive about work demands, and to understand it will take time for the person to get back to full productivity. Ease the workload for grieving colleagues, so they can go home early or offer time off when colleagues are too grief stricken to be effective. Failure to allow extra time can detract from employees' long-term productivity. One grieving person told me going back to work too soon rendered her incapable of giving the job the attention it required. Another person said, "It would have been nice if they had trusted me to come in and do the essentials, then leave when I needed to."

As a supervisor, you may feel torn between showing compassion and protecting the bottom line. As difficult as it may be to disrupt work schedules or put extra burdens on coworkers, the alternative can be worse.

Denying an employee compassion and adequate time to grieve may complicate and slow the healing process. That's a sure prescription for rendering an effective worker incapable, in addition to risking the loss of a productive and loyal employee.