

Responding to bereavement at work



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To earn the commitment of its staff, any organisation needs a culture in which employees are valued for their humanity as well as their output. At work, 'caring' may be seen as sentimental, unbusinesslike or even hypocritical, but the concept is fundamental to

a company's responsibility for the individual and how a bereavement is handled should reflect that culture.

Organisations need to care about bereaved members of staff and plan to meet their needs.

When a death affects people at work, line managers should be the front line of support, but they may feel ill-prepared to deal with the situation. The primary task of a human resources team, or a bereavement professional called in to help, is to ensure that managers and staff are given both personal support and all the information they need.

What can happen when news of a death breaks in an office?

Tim was helping Judy wrestle with a complicated insurance claim, when he received a phone call from the father of another member of his staff, Andrew, telling him that Andrew would not be coming in that day because his wife and baby had just been killed in a car crash. Tim managed to say that Andrew should take all the time he needed and that his father should let him know if there was anything the company could do to help. When he put the phone down, Judy asked him what had happened. So he told her; at least that sorted out the problem of informing the staff. But what next?

For the rest of the day Tim found himself preoccupied. He remembered Andrew's excitement when his son was born and thought about his own grandchild, about the same age as Andrew's baby. He rang Emma in the human resources division to inform her of the situation and she asked him if he wanted any help, but he said that it was fine. Feeling claustrophobic, Tim went out to where his team worked. The open-plan area was uncannily quiet but not a lot of work seemed to be getting done. He realised what a close knit

group they were. He didn't think that anything in particular was required of him, yet felt out of his depth. The next day he rang Emma back: it might be useful to have a chat after all.

Human resources (HR) staff or bereavement professionals need to be prepared in advance so that they can best provide the support and guidance management will need in these circumstances.

SUPPORTING A MANAGER

In the initial meeting with management after a staff bereavement, the priority for

EDITOR'S NOTE

Our working life and our home life take place in two different worlds. Even when something as devastating as a bereavement takes place outside work we expect and are expected to carry on working, almost as if nothing had happened. Granted that we are permitted to take time off for the funeral, most of us can expect very little else from the world of work where we spend so much of our time.

To some bereaved people this is a blessing.

However chaotic life has become, we can escape from the reminders of our loss when we are at work and carry on with our lives without disruption. Work can give some respite from grief. For others work can be an ordeal, interfering with our need to take time out for grief and taxing our meagre reserves of concentration, judgement and energy.

Here Charles-Edwards provides clear guidelines for those in the workplace who care enough to help staff through the crises of bereavement.

the HR staff member is to concentrate on listening skills, both to sort out the issues needing action and to allow the manager to open up. Some managers feel safer focusing on the practical aspects in the first instance, like compassionate leave and what the company should be doing, only later feeling free to off-load what they have been feeling. They may be deeply upset but imagine they need to be strong for the staff, or be feeling guilty at *not* being deeply upset. HR people need a fine balance of practical competence and knowledge, interwoven with emotional literacy and a genuine care for staff.

There may be uncertainties about how far to go in accommodating staff distracted from their work and how soon things need to get back to 'normal'. No death should be minimised: an apparently mundane death can be a cause of continuing disorientation and detachment from previous priorities, such as work. Excessive sympathy can, however, be inappropriate and unhelpful for some. The balance between minimising and catastrophising is a fine one.

Affirmation is likely to be needed for what a manager is doing well in what could be unknown territory outside their skill base. On the other hand, managers who have had experience of bereavement may think they know what a bereaved staff member is going through. They may need to be reminded that no one is an expert on another's grief; the closer situations are, superficially, the greater the danger of thinking that the inner experience is the same.

The quality of the HR staff member's listening should reflect the kind of attention the line manager needs to offer the staff involved. Ability to cope with the expression of raw grief may be a factor in deciding which of them should be offering direct support to bereaved staff, as well as their workloads, availability, motivation and experience.

BEREAVED STAFF

Compassionate leave

The first message bereaved staff members need to hear is that they must take what time out they need: work comes second. Some may want to come back relatively soon, while others need more time off.

Funeral and practical short-term issues

Family and close friends of the bereaved person often have the practical arrangements

(registering the death, funeral, decisions about the body etc) well in hand, but sometimes there is no-one to help and company support can mean a great deal.

A personal letter of sympathy from a representative of the company needs to be organised, and the choice of who sends it is a sensitive one. A senior manager or director can be appropriate, particularly if they have a reputation for caring about people and have met the staff member concerned. Time off to attend the funeral needs to be planned for all those employees who want to go.

Return to work

Some find it helpful to visit the workplace before they come back, if only to see the manager, and maybe have a chat with colleagues to break the ice. Coming back part-time for the first week or two can also work well. Concentration may be considerably reduced in the early weeks. Where safety is an issue, or tight deadlines or other stressful situations are unavoidable, ways of protecting the member of staff (and others) in the short term should be explored.

CHECK LIST FOR MANAGERS AND COLLEAGUES

When a bereaved person returns to work DO

Acknowledge the loss: care more about the bereaved person than your own embarrassment

Encourage them to talk if they want to

Respect both their reticence and their openness

Make it safe for people to cry without loss of self-respect

Reassure that very powerful, vivid and unfamiliar feelings and dreams are a normal part of grieving

Ensure that other close colleagues know of the bereavement

Find out whether the bereaved wants others to be informed, whom and how

Check the quality, quantity and availability of support outside work

Discourage people from taking major decisions early in the bereavement

Acknowledge important anniversaries suitably and sensitively (of the death, as well as births, weddings etc)

DON'T

Pressurise them to get on with work if it is not essential

Minimise the impact of the loss

Reassure, when what is needed is permission to share grief

Limit the time in which support is given

Expect bereaved colleagues to be 'back to normal' quickly

Immediate support

It is vital for the line manager or HR staff to plan frequent contact in the early days. A 'how is it going?' meeting is usually best at the end of the shift, day or week, so that if the person becomes upset they do not need to go back into work. The manager should not force things but make it clear that it is fine to talk about what they are finding most difficult at, or outside, work. The concern needs to be genuine and uninterrupted time should be spent with the bereaved member of staff initially probably daily, even if only for a few minutes.

The level of support available from family, friends and others outside the company needs to be ascertained. If this needs supplementing at some stage, and the company does not have someone with relevant experience and training on the staff, a bereavement organisation, such as Cruse Bereavement Care, should be suggested. Managers will find it helpful to have some background reading about bereavement as well as information about organisations offering external support¹.

Longer-term monitoring and support

It is important that support is not withdrawn suddenly. The regular or *ad hoc* meetings can become gradually less frequent and may be quite low key, but they are an important means of monitoring how the member of staff is coping. For some, it is good to interweave them with work discussions.

Bereavement counselling is helpful for some but is certainly not relevant to everyone and should not usually be the first port of call. The need for it may not emerge until some months after a death, or even longer, when perhaps immediate support is drying up and the bereaved person feels stuck.

DEATHS AFFECTING THE WORK GROUP

Certain deaths are likely to have a particularly powerful impact on colleagues, individually or as a group, for example:

- the death of a child or young person
- a violent death, eg accident, murder or suicide
- a death of a working colleague or recently retired staff member
- a death occurring at work.

In these cases, it may be helpful to bring in an external consultant or counsellor who can be involved in a number of ways.

Before the bereaved member of staff returns to work, the counsellor can talk through the issues with the line manager and the staff. Short meetings (about an

hour) with small groups of staff offer a chance for a facilitated discussion on how they have been affected and the questions raised. A short description of the bereavement process is useful, emphasising that bereavement tends to be an unpredictable emotional switchback so that colleagues need to be ready to accept ups or downs. This could also be an opportunity to talk about how, where and when they might like to acknowledge the loss.

The counsellor can also meet the bereaved staff member, either before they return to work or soon afterwards. They might meet alone initially and then possibly with the line manager to discuss any specific needs associated with settling back into work.

On each visit there can be an open invitation from the line manager for staff to meet the counsellor in private. One colleague may feel overwhelmed by the situation because it reminds her of the death of her own baby at the same age; another may be disconcerted because the bereaved person is behaving as if nothing had happened. It is easy to project on to the bereaved how we think they should behave.

For some, the workplace is a refuge from the grief that seems inescapable at home. For others, who may be keeping everyone else afloat at home, work is one place in which they can receive some support for themselves.

BEING PREPARED

In the case study quoted at the beginning of this article, Emma is easily persuaded that things are 'fine' at first. Tim struggles with his own feelings, and leaves his staff to do the same, before finally acknowledging that they could do with some help.

It is inevitable that deaths will impact on the workplace from time to time and HR staff cannot be expected to deal effectively with the resulting bereavement without proper training in this area. If at all possible managers, too, should be briefed in advance, possibly as part of an induction package, in how to deal with such sensitive issues and the importance of seeking support as soon as possible.

Death can be both unexpected and violent. The great majority of those who died in the New York and Washington terrorist incidents on 11 September 2001 did so in the course of, or at, work. That brought home how important it is for the workplace to be prepared for the unexpected, including death and bereavement. ^{BC}

Reference

1. Charles-Edwards D. Bereavement at Work. London: Duckworth, 2000.