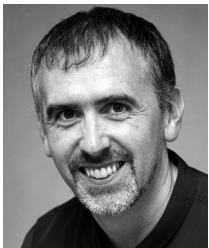


# Grief in the workplace

## Developing a bereavement policy

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**Abstract:** What do workplaces do when an employee is bereaved? What, if any, support and special provision do they make? The Irish Hospice Foundation surveyed 34 Irish organisations to explore their policies and procedures for supporting bereaved employees. While all the organisations had experienced employee-related bereavement in the previous 12 months, only four had any kind of formal, written policy. The majority made some kind of provision for compassionate leave, but this varied widely, and decisions about further leave and support were sometimes left to line managers' discretion. This article outlines the key findings from the survey and suggests a template that could be adapted by workplaces to provide a clear and consistent bereavement policy that would benefit the organisation, line managers and the individual employee alike.

**Keywords:** Bereavement policy, workplace, survey, employee, compassionate leave

Work is a part of everyday life, and the workplace, along with family and friends, has an important role in helping employees to adjust to the losses that they encounter in their lives. While grief is a normal, though difficult, part of life, managers often feel uncomfortable and ill-equipped when faced with the reality of a grieving employee (Charles-Edwards, 2001). Developing an organisational bereavement policy is an important first step in proactively managing bereaved employees and ensuring a consistent and equitable approach.

The following are typical situations that can occur within an organisation when a member of staff experiences a bereavement.

Jean and Mike are a sister and brother who work in a large company. Their mother was killed suddenly six months ago in a road traffic accident. Jean was visibly upset and found coming back to work very difficult. Her manager, Clare, tried to be understanding by adjusting Jean's workload and arranging for her to work reduced hours. In contrast, Mike returned soon after the funeral and seemed to be managing well, with hardly any change in his productivity. Then, out of the blue, Mike went to Clare and asked for the same conditions as his sister; he was evidently very aggrieved that he had not been offered them himself. Clare was bewildered. After all, it was over six months since Mike's mother died – surely he should be over the worst of it by now? She felt out of her depth. She wanted to be compassionate

but wondered if Mike was trying to take advantage of the situation, and she was wary of setting precedents. She had thought that the best way to deal with grief situations in the workplace was on an individual basis, but now she was beginning to wonder if something more structured was required.

Paula is a clinical nurse manager working in a busy hospital. A number of her staff had experienced personal bereavements (parents, fiancé, friends, other relatives) in the previous 12 months and this placed a lot of demands on her as a manager. Staff reacted differently: some wanted support and others wanted to be left to get on with their job. Paula tried to be fair and do the right thing for each person but she was unsure what to do and say. There was very little guidance from the organisation other than a standard compassionate leave entitlement of three days around the time of the death. Paula felt that more was required, especially given the variety of bereavements that her staff had experienced and their differing personalities and needs.

Steve is a foreman in a building company with over 30 people reporting to him. He is a practical man who is well liked and respected by his staff, many of whom are from different countries and cultures. Steve believes in fostering good working relationships and generally his staff get on well together. The child of one of his best workers died recently, only a month after she was born. Another worker's wife had a miscarriage

at around the same time. Steve felt he was not the best at dealing with emotional issues but sensed that something was required of him as a manager, to help the workers with these difficult experiences. He wanted to be supportive but was unsure what would be appropriate, given the types of deaths and the fact that both workers were from different cultures to his own. He would have really appreciated some help on this and felt that some kind of guidelines or protocols would have been very useful.

### Workplace grief

In Ireland and the EU there is no legal entitlement to compassionate, paid or other leave for bereavement. Leave or support is provided at the discretion of the organisation. In 2002 there were over 29,000 deaths recorded in Ireland (CSO, 2003). By taking even a conservative estimate of just 10 people being directly affected by each death, this means that approximately 300,000, or one in ten of an organisation's workforce, could be directly affected each year by bereavement. As Stein and Winokuer (1989), quoting Kaplan, point out: 'There isn't a manager or executive who will not be confronted eventually with death in the workplace.'

But what are people like Clare, Paula and Steve to do and say when faced with these situations? A number of authors have made valuable contributions to the discussion of grief in the workplace (Stein & Winokuer, 1989; Eyetsemitan, 1998; Papadatou, 2000; 2001; Lattanzi-Licht, 2002; Charles-Edwards, 2005, 2001; Wolfelt, 2005). A further step could be to develop an organisational bereavement policy to which managers and staff can refer for guidance. How would an organisation go about developing one, and what might it contain?

### Survey

In 2006, in response to these questions, the Irish Hospice Foundation conducted a survey of current bereavement policies and practices in 34 Irish organisations. They ranged in size from

150 to over 5,000 employees and comprised a mixture of private, public and local government organisations. A human resources or employee assistance professional was contacted in each of the organisations and asked to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire covered current policies, organisational awareness of bereavement issues, and support provided by the organisation to bereaved employees.

### Key findings

#### Current policies

All of the organisations had experienced employee bereavement (death or serious illness of a person related to an employee) in the previous 12 months. In spite of this, the majority of organisations (88%; n=30) did not have what could be described as a written bereavement policy that would provide guidelines to staff and line managers on procedures and best practice. One organisation had a comprehensive death-in-service policy 'to provide for a common approach and to ensure that such events are treated with consideration and respect'. Another had a policy for dealing with bereaved families when an employee dies. Only a small number (15%; n=5) had policies for supporting employees caring for a seriously ill relative.

#### Compassionate leave

Few organisations had detailed bereavement policies, but many (91%; n=31) made some kind of provision for compassionate leave. The most common was either five or three days paid leave (note: in Ireland, funerals are generally held within three days of the death), depending on the employee's relationship to the deceased. Thirteen (38%) allowed five or more days, 17 (50%) allowed three days, and one allowed two days.

#### Compassionate leave discretion

Interestingly, half (17) the organisations allowed line managers to use their discretion in

offering a bereaved employee more days off on compassionate leave than those specified in the company policy.

### Impact of bereavement on employees

The majority of organisations showed good awareness of the impact of bereavement on employees (Figure 1):

- 32 (94%) believed an employee's work performance was, or could be, affected by bereavement
- 21 (62%) believed there were or could be health and safety implications for employees who are bereaved
- 15 (44%) reported that employees took more sick leave following a bereavement
- 17 (50%) believed that employees behave differently after a bereavement

### Support for bereaved employees

Many employers were sensitive to the impact of death and grief on colleagues. There was

evidence of good practice in relation to supporting bereaved colleagues in the organisations surveyed, but there were also gaps.

Short-term support immediately following a death tended to be quite good. This included facilitating attendance at funeral rituals, informing colleagues, managing the return to work of the bereaved employee and sending a letter of condolence (Figure 2).

Long-term bereavement support was less common. Only four organisations (12%) had information on bereavement support that could be given to employees, and only three (9%) provided guidelines to staff on how to support bereaved colleagues. On the positive side, well over one third (38%; n=13) offered employees flexible work options, and 14 (41%) made provision for employees to access counselling, if required (Figure 3).

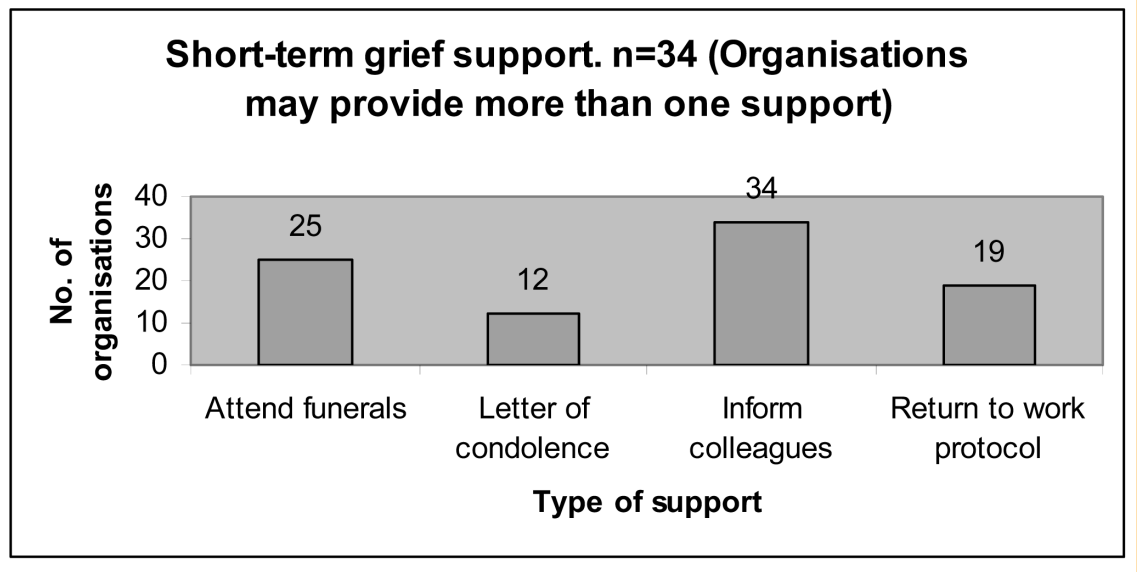
### Why a bereavement policy?

The survey revealed that, while there was a general awareness in these organisations of

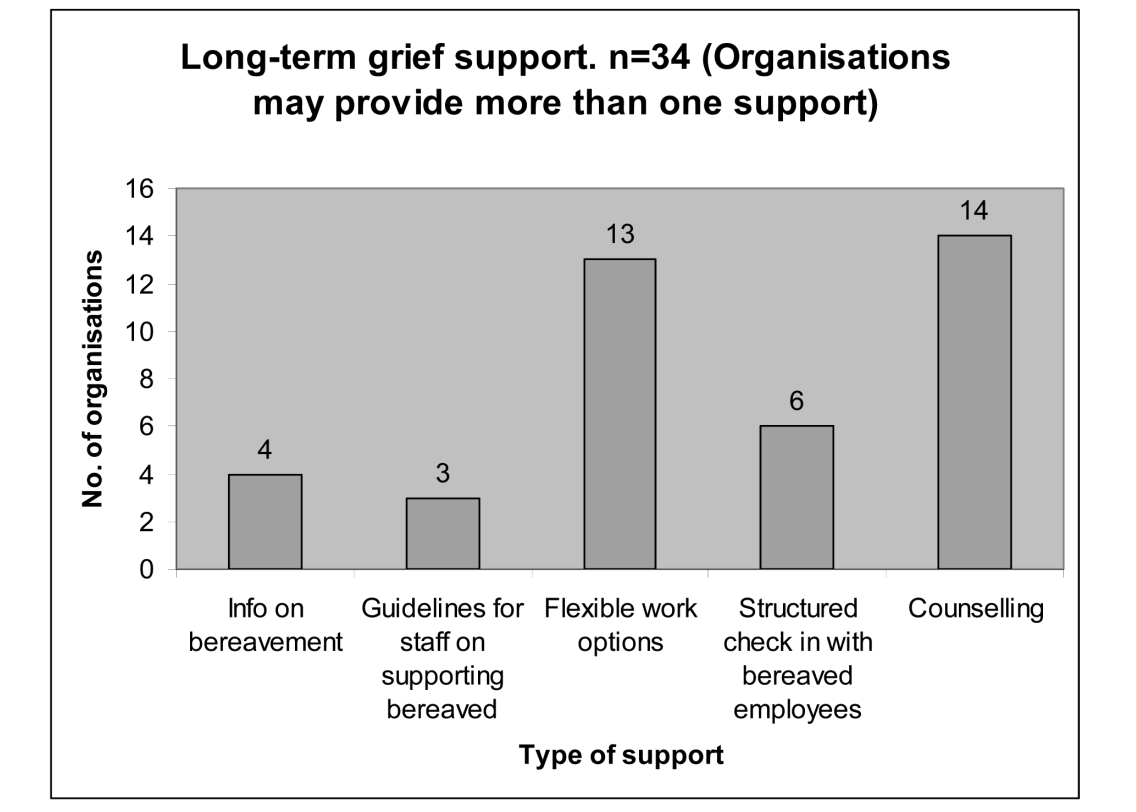
**Figure 1:** Impact of grief on employees



**Figure 2:** Short-term grief support



**Figure 3:** Long-term grief support



the impact of bereavement on employees, and some good short-term bereavement support practices, there was little available in terms of structured resources to help managers like Clare, Paula and Steve. Individual elements, such as flexible working policies, employee assistance programmes and counselling sessions, were offered by some organisations, but these were not offered in any co-ordinated way to support bereaved employees. Managers generally wanted to do the right thing for bereaved employees, but were unsure what that was or how to go about it.

One place to start would be the development of an organisational bereavement policy. Such a policy would:

- set out standard procedures and entitlements that apply to all employees, to ensure a consistent approach
- provide a reference for managers and staff to give them confidence in dealing with this difficult and challenging workplace issue
- show that the organisation takes grief at work seriously, and provide a foundation on which a supportive response to grieving employees can be developed.

## Key elements to consider

Organisations vary hugely in terms of culture, size and operating environment. What will work as a policy in a large organisation may not be possible in a smaller, owner-led business. It is important, therefore, when developing a bereavement policy, to reflect the culture and ethos of the organisation as well as the environment in which the business or organisation operates.

Some key elements to consider include:

- 1 leave entitlement
- 2 the return to work
- 3 supporting employees who are grieving
- 4 health and safety
- 5 cultural diversity
- 6 organisational values and ethos.

In relation to bereavement leave, it is worth noting that not everyone will need all of the options, but they can be offered as a minimum standard that may or may not be taken up by the bereaved employee.

Table 1 contains a template bereavement policy that the Irish Hospice Foundation

**Table 1:** Sample bereavement policy

### 1 Leave entitlements

#### Paid leave

- Bereavement leave is paid leave that allows an employee time off to deal with their personal distress, primarily when a member of their family dies.
- In the event of the death of an immediate relative, five working days paid leave will be granted. An immediate relative includes a spouse,\* child,\*\* parent, sister, brother or a person with whom the employee is in a relationship of domestic dependency\*\*\*

\*Spouse also includes a partner with whom the employee is co-habiting, but who is not the employee's legal spouse.

\*\*Child covers children in respect of whom the employee is the adoptive parent or is in 'loco parentis'.

\*\*\*As per the Parental Leave Amendment Act 2006 Ireland: A person who resides with an employee is taken to be in a relationship of domestic dependency with the employee if, in the event of injury or illness, one reasonably relies on the other to make arrangements for the provision of care. Note: The sexual orientation of the persons concerned is immaterial.

- Three days leave will be allowed on the death of a mother/father-in-law, grandparents, grandchildren, son/daughter-in-law.
- One day of leave will be allowed on the death of an uncle/aunt to facilitate attendance at the funeral.
- In exceptional circumstances, three to five days leave may be granted on the death of someone outside the immediate family. These circumstances would include where the employee is responsible for funeral arrangements or has to travel abroad to attend the funeral.
- An employee should notify their line manager of their intention to take leave under the policy as soon as possible or, at latest, on the first day of absence. Line managers have the right to exercise discretion in exceptional circumstances as outlined above. Leave days must be taken consecutively.

### **Annual leave**

- In the event of a death of an immediate relative, an employee may be facilitated in taking annual leave at short notice to supplement their bereavement leave. Requests should be directed to the line manager.
- An employee who suffers a family bereavement while on annual leave and has to disrupt or cancel leave plans can avail of bereavement leave and take their displaced annual leave at a future date.

### **Unpaid leave**

- Unpaid leave on compassionate grounds up to a maximum of one month may be granted for the purpose of coping with family difficulties arising from the death of an immediate relative. An employee should consult with their line manager.

## **2 Return to work**

- In certain circumstances a full return to work may not be possible for an employee following the death of an immediate relative – for example, where new child care arrangements have to be sourced or responsibility for the care of an elderly parent has transferred to the employee.
- In such instances it may be possible to facilitate a phased return to work on a part-time or reduced hours basis. Any such arrangement would need to be agreed in advance by the line manager, would be subject to an agreed maximum and would be managed in line with a flexible working arrangement/part-time working policy.

## **3 Employee support**

- The organisation acknowledges that bereavement leave is intended to support employees in the immediate period around the death of a relative. However, the process of grief, the natural reaction and adjustment to loss and change may take a significant time and will be personal to each individual.
- An employee with any concerns about the grieving process impacting on their work performance should discuss this in confidence with either their line manager or the Human Resources Department, to ensure necessary support is in place.
- The organisation recognises that the majority of people do not require counselling to cope effectively with their grief. However, for employees wishing to avail of professional help in coming to terms with a significant loss, the organisation will cover the cost of up to six counselling sessions with an independent counselling practice. This is a confidential service and can be accessed directly through Human Resources.

## **4 Health and safety**

- The health and safety assessment of the workplace should include a consideration of the impact of bereavement on the employee, their duties, and the context in which they are working.
- Any employee concerned about their ability to conduct their duties safely in the weeks following the loss of an immediate relative should discuss this with their line manager.
- Line management reserves the right to request an employee to meet the organisation doctor before resuming full duties.

## **5 Cultural diversity**

- Different cultures respond to death in significantly different ways.
- If unsure of how to respond to a bereaved employee from a different culture, it is best to ask the person or someone else from their cultural group about what is appropriate.

## **6 Concluding remarks**

The organisation acknowledges the personalised nature of bereavement and grief and is committed to supporting employees in practical and reasonable ways. Any queries or requests should be directed to your line manager in the first instance, or the Human Resources Department.

developed in consultation with representatives from unions, management, and employer and employee organisations. The template can be adapted to the needs of the individual organisation.

For Clare, Paula and Steve, a policy such as this, adapted appropriately for their organisations, supported by management and understood by employees, would ease the dilemmas they were facing. When employees know clearly what they are and are not entitled to, difficult situations can be avoided.

Knowing that the organisation proactively supports bereaved employees, that there are options around leave entitlements, and that there are resources such as flexible working policies available if required, allows the manager to tailor her or his responses to the differing needs of grieving staff.

Highlighting key areas in relation to bereaved employees, and providing basic pointers on aspects such as cultural diversity helps the manager to have confidence in dealing with the differing needs of grieving staff.

## Conclusions

The workplace has an important role in helping bereaved employees adjust to the changes brought about by their loss. Most organisations and managers want to do the right thing for their bereaved staff but often have very little to guide them in terms of what might be appropriate. Developing an organisational bereavement policy can help managers and employees deal with the often difficult and sensitive issues of grief in the workplace. It is not a panacea and, like any policy, it will only be of value if it is

properly supported and understood throughout the organisation. Yet it is an important first step in creating a workplace culture that helps and supports employees to come to terms with their loss and avoids blocking or inhibiting the natural process of grieving. ■

The booklet *Grief at Work: Developing a Bereavement Policy* (McGuinness, 2007) can be downloaded from [www.hospice-foundation.ie](http://www.hospice-foundation.ie). Hard copies can be requested from The Irish Hospice Foundation Tel 00 3531 6793188.

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