

When an Employee Dies

One of your employees has passed away. What actions should you take immediately? How do you support your team as they grieve? What's the best way to honor your colleague at work?



Immediately After The Death

01

Contact the deceased employee's family.

Make the phone call from a quiet location when you're unlikely to be interrupted or distracted, not in a rush and prepared to sit with your sadness and the family member's. Begin by expressing your condolences, then ask what the family would like shared about the death. Inquire about the memorial service and whether you and your team may attend. Find out if the family would prefer a donation instead of flowers and whether they have any immediate needs like meals, groceries, funds for medical or funeral expenses. Before you end the call, determine who their preferred point of contact is and the best way to communicate with that person.

02

Share the sad news.

Meet with the onsite employees in person and everyone else virtually, first with your deceased colleague's team, then with the rest of the organization. Convey whatever details are appropriate to share as well as what you'll be doing on behalf of the company

to honor the loss initially – a card, flowers, charitable donation, etc. Allow ample time and space for people to react, ask questions and share their sadness. Encourage everyone who knew the employee to send a note to the family sharing a memory or story, what they'll miss or what they valued about their colleague. Call the employees who couldn't attend to be sure they hear the news from you and not secondhand. Use email as a last resort for those employees that can't be reached any other way.

03

Inform everyone else.

As appropriate, contact clients, customers, donors, the board of directors, vendors, volunteers, the general public and the media, beginning with those most affected by the death. Share whatever information you can, let them know who will be taking over the deceased employee's responsibilities in the short term and encourage them to contact you directly with questions or concerns or if their needs aren't being met. Be prepared for more probing questions if the death took place at work or is seen as newsworthy but try to focus the conversation on how much the employee meant to your organization and how you plan to honor her and deal with the loss.

04

Determine how to cover your deceased employee's responsibilities.

Change his voicemail and set up an auto reply to his email. Redirect both to the person who will be responding to the messages. Determine whether you have access to your colleague's desktop computer, laptop, office, files, etc. and how you'll get it if you don't. Meet with the team members who will be covering your deceased colleague's responsibilities to determine what needs to be done and to distribute the work. Set up regular check-in meetings to be sure nothing falls through the cracks.

05

Attend the memorial service.

If allowed by the family, invite other employees and give them paid time off to attend.

During The First Month

06

Ask Human Resources to contact the family.

The HR team can make arrangements to issue the final paycheck and inform the family about any life insurance, retirement fund distributions, workers compensation benefits, accidental death coverage, COBRA health insurance available to survivors, etc. Email, at least initially, is best as talking on the phone can be challenging after the death of a loved one.

07

Create space for people to talk about the loss and share their sadness.

Let your employees know that they are invited to share stories and memories at the next team meeting and all staff gathering. Consider asking one or two people to speak first so others feel more comfortable sharing. Begin the meeting by offering your thoughts about the deceased employee and asking for a moment of silence. Call on the people who have agreed to go first, then open the floor for anyone else who wants to speak. Allow employees to gather informally as needed to mourn and process their grief. Keep a watchful eye on those who were closest to the deceased in case they need extra support.

08

Arrange for grief support.

The death of a colleague can trigger a host of unexpected reactions that may require professional help to process. Sadness about the loss of a friend, fear about one's own mortality, guilt over an unpleasant final encounter with the deceased, regret over a damaged professional relationship that can no longer be repaired. A trained mental health professional can help your team, either individually or collectively, understand their feelings about the loss and offer ideas on how to address them. This is particularly important if the employee died on the job, in a violent manner or by overdose or suicide.

09

Celebrate your colleague.

Hold a memorial service or other gathering to honor your deceased employee. Invite the family and ask if they would like to speak. Include others outside the organization (e.g., board members, clients, partners, volunteers, donors) who knew the employee well. Choose a few employees to speak about what your colleague meant to them and the organization. Serve his favorite dish or dessert. Create a photo memory board or video. Set up a table with blank note cards and pens, ask people to jot down a story or memory and give the cards to the family.

In The Months That Follow

10

Allow space for a range of reactions.

Some employees may remain productive while others may struggle in the aftermath of their colleague's death. Rather than focus on what isn't getting done, encourage your team to prioritize what's most important.

11

Contact the family about their loved one's belongings.

Does the family want you or a team member to pack up everything or would they prefer to do it? If they prefer the former, do they want to pick up the box(es) or should you drop them off? Inquire about any company property your employee had at home – keys, laptop, files, equipment, etc., and make arrangements to retrieve it at the same time.

12

Be sensitive to your employees' reactions.

You may not be able to wait for long to hire a replacement or to reassign your deceased colleague's workspace. What's most important is that there are no surprises about the timing of the packing up, the need to put someone else at the desk or confusion as to the reason why. Be open about the timeline and process as well as your plans for hiring a replacement.

13

Decide how to honor your colleague.

Some ideas:

- Create a video or memory book with photos and stories and make a copy for the family
- Contribute annually to a cause or nonprofit that was important to the deceased employee
- Establish a scholarship or annual award in your colleague's honor
- Name a conference room or specific area in the office after the employee
- Create a workplace memorial – plant a tree or garden, install a commemorative bench, hang a plaque or memory board
- Hold a fundraiser or luncheon or volunteer as a team for a day of service once a year

14

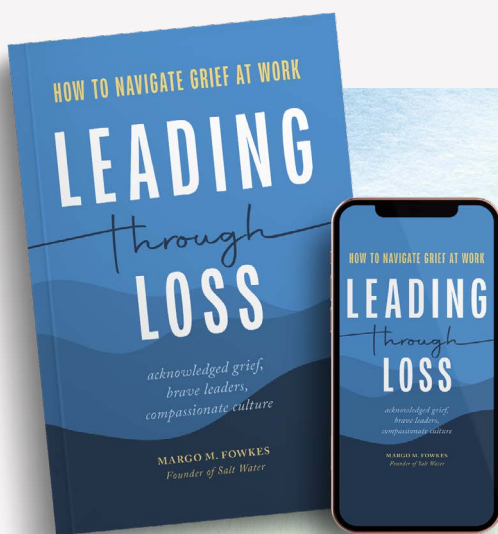
Keep communicating and watch for signs of concern.

If the deceased was an executive or senior leader, employees may be nervous about what will happen with their team or department. If the deceased was the CEO or owner, they may worry about whether or not they'll have a job. Provide what information you can and be honest when you don't know or can't yet share. Encourage employees to come to you if they have questions or concerns, need extra support or access to grief counseling or other resources.

15

Continue to remember your deceased colleague.

Send a card to a surviving spouse or child on the anniversary of your employee's death. Continue saying her name in the office and encourage your colleague to share memories and stories of your time together. Gather once a year in her memory for a meal or charitable activity.



For more advice on navigating grief in the workplace, visit leadingthroughloss.net.

OnTarget
CONSULTING inc.