

Introduction

Facing the Challenge of Grief at Work

“There were people who didn’t know how to react to the death of my son. That was awkward because I had to make them feel comfortable. They wanted to say something, but they didn’t know what to say, and they were afraid I was going to cry. So they didn’t say anything at all.”

—Linda Knight Crane

GRIEF IS AN INESCAPABLE PART of life. The death of one or more of our essential people will knock us sideways, often in unexpected ways, and when it happens, we will bring our pain and sadness into work with us. Yet the vast majority of workplaces are ill-prepared to navigate the minefield of loss.

Regardless of how and when grief shows up in your workplace (and it will, if it hasn’t already), this book can help you navigate it.

Leading Through Loss offers practical tools and ideas from leaders who've dealt with loss, either their own or that of their employees, and provides insight into the perspectives and experiences of grieving employees: what they want and need, what helps and what hurts, what support they were deeply grateful for, and what they wish their leaders had done differently.

The twenty-five leaders who were interviewed for the book span all levels from manager to CEO. They work in a wide variety of industries—from manufacturing to nonprofits, high school to high tech. In the chapters that follow, they describe the mistakes they've made, share their hard-won wisdom, and offer advice in their own words.

Leading Through Loss provides the information you need to create a compassionate culture in your workplace, which goes well beyond offering bereavement leave. The vast majority of US companies provide just three days of paid time off after the death of an employee's loved one, which isn't enough time to handle the funeral arrangements, deal with the initial legal and financial issues, and obtain a death certificate, much less grieve.

In 2017, two years after the death of her husband, SurveyMonkey CEO David Goldberg, Sheryl Sandberg announced that Facebook employees would now receive up to twenty days of paid leave to grieve a member of their immediate family and up to ten days to grieve an extended family member. She called on other companies to do the same, but only SurveyMonkey and Mastercard followed suit.

While having two weeks or a month of bereavement leave, instead of a few days, is undoubtedly beneficial, the CEOs, senior leaders, and other bereaved employees interviewed for this book were unequivocal that what matters far more is whether the team and the organization acknowledge the loss and how the manager and the rest of the team handle a grieving employee's return to work.

If an employee has a heart attack, they will be on leave for four to twelve weeks and return with a reduced or adjusted workload and other accommodations. Their coworkers will send cards and flowers, drop off meals, and cover their assignments until they recover. People will ask how they're feeling, express concern, and offer to take work off of their plate.

But if that same employee's child dies, they will likely be allotted just three or four days of bereavement leave. Their manager and a handful of coworkers might send a note, drop off a meal, or attend the memorial service. When the grieving parent returns to work, the assignments that piled up while they were gone will probably be waiting for them. A few people might ask if they're "okay," but most will feel awkward or uncomfortable and opt to say nothing at all. Even the brave souls willing to bring up their deceased child will stop asking or offering extra assistance within a few weeks or months. Team members may wonder why the grieving employee doesn't smile as easily as they used to or notice that their colleague has gotten quieter in meetings, but no one will ask.

When the grieving employee misses a deadline or makes a mistake, their coworkers will feel frustrated. Even if they consider that grief could be the cause, they may not check in or find out where and how the grieving person is struggling. When the silence and lack of understanding forces the employee to do their best to return to their old self or stop mentioning their child, their colleagues will assume they're over their grief.

Finding ways to support someone who's grieving is challenging under any circumstances but particularly in the workplace. Death can happen without warning, leaving leaders unprepared and unsure of what to do beyond what's in the employee handbook—a few days of bereavement leave, an employee assistance plan or program (EAP), and access to counseling or a grief group. An effective, compassionate response requires forethought and planning. Ignoring a colleague's loss can be costly as unaddressed,

unacknowledged grief will take a physical, mental, and emotional toll on an employee, a team, and the workplace as a whole.

This book will help you successfully navigate the murky, sometimes treacherous waters of grief in the workplace by:

- unpacking the varied and complex experience of grief
- outlining what it will cost you, your team, and your organization if you fail to address an employee's grief
- demystifying how to acknowledge an employee's loss and educate the rest of the team on how to support their grieving colleague
- advising you on how to create a plan that will allow the grieving employee to return to work feeling supported
- detailing the actions that need to be taken when an employee dies and offering ideas on how to honor the loss in a meaningful way
- providing a road map on how to navigate your own grief while you continue to lead the team or organization
- specifying ways to support a grieving employee in a virtual or hybrid workplace

As consultant Alan Weiss says, we don't have a personal life and a work life; we have a life. Coworkers can become some of our closest friends. After a death, the workplace can be a distraction, a source of comfort, even a haven where we can cope with our grief and begin to heal. Death is both universal and unavoidable, and grief is the natural response when we lose someone dear to us. It's time we got better at supporting each other through it, especially in the workplace.

Most managers have good intentions, but without firsthand experience with devastating loss, they are left confused and confounded as to how to support someone who has just suffered one.

Their awkward efforts, no matter how well-meaning, can cause lasting damage to their relationships with their colleagues and to the morale and health of the organization.

While no one can plan for every contingency or anticipate every tragedy, organizations and their leaders need to be ready to offer more than a few days of leave and access to counseling. Robust, clearly defined bereavement policies and a willingness to have frequent, open conversations about grief and loss will enable you and your leadership team to face and navigate a broad range of difficult situations. Successfully supporting bereaved employees at every level, including the CEO, requires brave leaders who will acknowledge the presence of grief in the workplace and a compassionate culture in which grieving employees are both seen and supported over an extended period of time.

Grief Support in a Virtual Workplace

“People are going to say the wrong thing because they don’t know what to say. Arm your employees with three things to say and not to say. Keep it simple.

The best:

1. Just know that I am thinking about you.
2. I appreciate you and the way you are working through your grief.
3. Hang in there; this is going to be a long road.

The worst:

1. You will get through this.
2. I can’t imagine how you must be feeling.
3. How are you feeling?”

—Trux Dole

DURING THE PANDEMIC, LOSS IS everywhere, yet the support a grieving employee desperately needs can be even harder to come by when the team is working online or in a hybrid work environment. In those settings, we lose the small, serendipitous moments of comfort that come from running into a colleague in the hallway or by the coffeemaker. An impromptu opportunity to check in or offer to go for a walk. A reassuring hand on the shoulder or quick word of support as everyone takes their seats before a meeting.

After her in-person team transitioned to remote work during COVID, Danilyn Rutherford, president of Wenner-Gren Foundation, discovered that “on Zoom, you really have to pay attention to pick up when something is going on for your colleagues.” An employee’s sadness can go unnoticed, as can their struggle to concentrate on work, when the only interaction with coworkers is virtual. It’s hard to see red eyes or read facial expressions on a screen. During team meetings, you may jump right into the agenda without remembering to check in with everyone, and even when you do, your employee may not feel comfortable answering honestly.

Grief support is difficult to navigate when we are working in the office; in a remote environment, it takes even more effort and thought. How can you ensure a grieving employee is getting the help and support they need when the team isn’t together in the office every day?

Contact your employee as soon as you hear the news.

Express your condolences using more than one form of communication—voice mail, text, Slack, email—to be sure your employee gets the message. Ask to talk on the phone so that you can understand what support they need immediately, what’s appropriate to share about their loss, and how you can help. Since the team is working remotely, determine whether there’s anything you need to pick up to cover the employee’s projects and assignments while they’re on leave.

Whenever an employee at the Society for the Blind suffers a loss, executive director Shari Roeseler always checks in as to what she should and shouldn't tell the other members of the team. "I want to know exactly what I can and can't share, and I want my colleague to tell me how they want the story told."

Share the news.

Let the other employees know what's happened, how you and the organization will be acknowledging the loss, and the best way for the team to do the same. If appropriate, provide details about the memorial or funeral service, and invite them to attend. Encourage them to send notes of condolence and support to their grieving team member. Distribute your employee's projects and assignments, and instruct everyone to contact you, not the griever, if they need direction or more information.

Create a re-entry road map.

When your grieving employee is ready to return to work, set up a phone or Zoom call to discuss whether they'll need accommodations (such as a temporary reduction in hours, a later start time so they can drop the kids off at school, or a few hours off each week to attend a grief support group). Review the employee's commitments, responsibilities, and deadlines, and discuss what they think they can and can't do. For example, if talking on the phone feels too difficult, ask them to focus on proposal writing or data analysis instead. Encourage them to tell you if anything feels difficult or overwhelming so you can make timely adjustments.

Ask for guidance for the team.

Does your grieving employee want their colleagues to bring up the loss on phone calls or during Zoom meetings? Should coworkers call to ask how the employee is doing or how they can help? Or would the griever prefer to be the one to bring it up?