



THE SUPERVISOR/HR NEWSLETTER

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Maintaining Effective Communication Channels
August 3rd, 1:00 – 2:00 PM CT

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Advanced Coaching Skills for Leaders
November 2nd, 1:00 – 2:00 PM CT

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Supervisors Can Help Ease Employees' Grief

Mourning doesn't have to be an awkward topic

Some supervisors understand the mourning process. They are patient when grieving employees are forgetful and kind when they cry. Going home early or getting time off to be with family isn't a problem. Their sensitivity to what the employee is going through allows the employee to continue at their job during one of their most difficult times.

Unfortunately, this experience is far from common. 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's grieving, you're not alone.

Costly Blunders

Why do people have so much trouble comforting colleagues who have suffered a loss? One reason may be the fear of death, and when it touches a colleague, it's a reminder of your own mortality. Because death is such a taboo subject, people aren't sure what to say when faced with a grieving person. Coworkers who'll 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'd feel if your parent died, and nobody at the office where you've 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. Below are some key points for supervisors.

Suggestions 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 break room scene: A person asks a colleague who's been off on maternity leave to see baby pictures. However, the newborn died.

Acknowledge the loss

It's 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 acknowledgment 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. Everyone grieves in their own way, in their 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. One suggestion is to get the team together and explain the need to compensate for a member who's grieving, to be sensitive about work demands, and to understand it will take time for the person to get back to full productivity.

If you can, 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. In some cases, going back to work too soon can render an employee incapable of giving the job the attention it requires.

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 his or her healing process. This can be a prescription for rendering an effective worker incapable, in addition to risking the loss of a productive and loyal employee.

Source: Kelly, L. & Schuette, B. (Ed.). (Revised 2019). Supervisors can help ease employees' grief. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

Ask Your EAP!

The following are answers to common questions supervisors have regarding employee issues and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to the EAP for a management consultation.

Q. When documenting evidence of reasonable suspicion of substance abuse, what should I be cautious about not omitting so my documentation is useful and effective?

A. Common omissions when creating documentation to support reasonable suspicion of substance abuse include failure to contrast behaviors witnessed with those normally observed. These other non-problematic behaviors show that what you have observed is not easily explained away by another cause. For example, if you witness an employee's uncontrollable and inappropriate laughter—a possible indication of illicit drug use—be sure to describe how the employee's mood and demeanor normally appear. Likewise, if an employee is behaving in a belligerent or aggressive manner, be sure to state that no provocation existed prior to the disturbing behavior, if indeed none was witnessed. These contrasts help make your documentation credible. In the latter example, the behavior documented is far less likely to be challenged and dismissed as a happy-go-lucky personality style.

Q. When an employee is referred to the EAP by a supervisor, if the employee truly believes they have no personal problem whatsoever, isn't this the same as forcing the employee to participate? Isn't this a problem for the EAP as a matter of ethics?

A. As a matter of policy, EAPs are voluntary and established to help employees address personal problems that may affect job performance, and they serve as helpful and appropriate mechanisms to assist supervisors in managing troubled employees. Within this framework, a supervisor referral based on job performance, even if an employee says they have no personal problems, does not conflict with ethics or the EAP's core technology (fundamental principles of operation). The classic example is the alcoholic in denial who attends the EAP after referral for performance problems, but later is motivated to enter treatment based upon an assessment, motivational counseling, and evidence of the disease. Some employers may modify their policies to make participation in EAPs mandatory for certain infractions. However, even in such cases, referral is more akin to an accommodation with a disciplinary action held in abeyance, pending cooperation and follow-through with EAP recommendations.

Q. What is a common mistake supervisors make after informally referring an employee to the EAP for performance issues and urging them to attend?

A. The most common mistake is not formalizing the referral later if lasting changes in performance are not forthcoming. Some supervisors prefer to be less formal about urging troubled employees to participate in the EAP. This approach can be effective, and it is less confrontational, but it typically will not generate the same degree of urgency and cooperation as a formal referral process does. This can be a problem if a health condition exists that requires a strong commitment from the employee to treat it. For example, an employee with an attendance problem due to an undiagnosed gambling addiction may be less motivated to participate in every EAP recommendation to treat this difficult condition. Motivation and urgency, which are more likely with a formal supervisor referral, would be lacking. Loss of a valuable worker is a risk if the supervisor does not go the next step to formalize the EAP referral with continuing performance problems.

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