Grieving for Co-Workers

People spend many hours of their lives with co-workers, and a co-worker’s death can be as devastating as losing a loved one. This is both a personal and professional loss for a business.

Management

It is important for managers to recognize the impact a death has on co-workers. Compassionate managers will find that employees benefit from being shown care, flexibility and respect for their pain.

When a manager is notified of the death of an employee, he or she should inform the staff as soon as possible. Note that some employees may find it difficult to continue to work that day.

While every organization’s culture differs, there are additional things a manager can do to assist his or her employees:

- Encourage employees to express their feelings.
- Provide an “open door” policy to all staff who wish to speak about their grief.
- Encourage employees to seek outside support, including using the company’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
- Be vigilant for any co-workers who may be having a particularly difficult time.
- If the business permits, offer flexible working hours so that employees have time to grieve.
- Be compassionate to co-workers who may be experiencing a decline in productivity and a difficult time coping.

Managers should work with human resources specialists and refer to company policy to establish protocols for responding to a worker’s death, including issues such as:

- Sharing information about cause of death
- Handling emotional impacts
- Allowing time off for co-workers to grieve

Employees may want to reach out and contact their co-worker’s family members. Managers should gather information about when or how the family would like to hear from people. Accordingly, managers should share any additional information the family wishes to convey in the event they would like to be left alone.

Employees

A co-worker’s death can be devastating for surviving employees. Everyone grieves differently; some co-workers may want to discuss the issue, while others may want to grieve privately. There are several ways employees can try to cope with their grief:

- Be attentive for co-workers who are having a difficult time.
- Be compassionate to fellow co-workers who may be experiencing a decline in productivity.
- If there is a new hire who is occupying the job of the departed employee, accept and welcome this person.

Grief is a natural process that requires time. If, even days or weeks later, an employee has difficulty accepting a co-worker’s death, consider consulting with a mental health professional such as a psychologist. The EAP can also help with suggestions and therapy sessions.
Remembering the Employee
With attendance at funeral and memorial services limited, employees may wish to have another way to remember their co-worker. Some ways to do this include:

- Hold a separate memorial service via remote access such as Zoom or other web platforms.
- Create a memorial board where co-workers can post messages or memories.
- Create a memory book for the family.
- Remember the person at virtual staff meetings or annual events.
- If possible, hold or join a fundraiser for a special cause in memory of the deceased.
- Establish a scholarship or other fund in the name of the deceased.
- Plant a tree on the company grounds.
- Put up a plaque or memorial item to denote the service of the employee.

Resources
- American Psychological Association: www.apa.org
- National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov
- National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization: www.nhpco.org
- AARP: www.aarp.org
- American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org
- National Funeral Directors Association: www.nfda.org