

Managing an Employee Who Has Lost a Loved One

1st October 2020

One of the difficult situations that can confront managers is how to best support an employee when they've lost a loved one. Different people handle death and mourning in different ways, so it's important to be sensitive to the mourner's individual needs while also supporting them. Here are some guidelines to follow both immediately after an employee's loss and when they return to work after a period of bereavement.

Immediately after a death

Supporting an employee through a time of bereavement is about more than walking them through your company's leave policy. You also want to show that you're emotionally supportive and willing to be flexible to meet their needs and the needs of their family when possible.

Express your condolences. It may be difficult to know what to say, but simply saying "I'm sorry for your loss" with sincerity can go a long way.

Let them know that work comes second. This will show them that you understand this is a time for them to be with their loved ones.

Ask what—if any—information they would like to be shared with co-workers. The mourner may choose to share details about a funeral, memorial, or wake for the public. If this is the case, human resources (HR) or you can distribute details to co-workers. If an employee asks that no information be shared, respect their confidentiality.

Contact the funeral home. You or a representative from the company should ask what the appropriate observance is, as sometimes flowers are culturally appropriate and sometimes they are not. The company or your team can also donate to a charity.

Be sensitive and flexible with bereavement leave when possible. Work with your company's HR department to discuss whether accommodations can be made, especially in cases when an employee has lost a spouse or partner and they may have children or older relatives who are now solely dependent upon them.

Make arrangements to cover the employee's workload. Ask co-workers to pick up assignments. This will help make sure that necessary work continues to be done without

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adding to the stress of the grieving person. If possible, you can also have phone calls or emails redirected for a period of leave.

When the employee returns to work

When an employee returns to work after bereavement leave, it's important that they not feel isolated or forced to share emotions and experiences they would rather keep private. Remember too that grief can affect productivity, at least for a time. Here are ways that you can offer support:

Acknowledge what's happened. After Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg lost her husband, she wrote, "Grief is a demanding companion. In those early days and weeks and months, it was always there, not just below the surface but on the surface." Different people process grief in different ways and at different times. Returning to work only to find that no one acknowledges what happened can feel isolating and awkward. Instead, find a private moment to offer your condolences.

"Grief is a demanding companion. In those early days and weeks and months, it was always there, not just below the surface but on the surface."

Sheryl Sandberg

Let the employee lead the conversation. After you have acknowledged a tragedy, try asking in a sincere way, "How are you?" If the employee quickly moves on, let the conversation go as they may feel put on the spot and forced to speak about emotions they're not comfortable sharing. However, if they wish to discuss what happened, listen openly and let them know that they have your support.

Maintain confidentiality. An employee who is grieving may tell you a lot. Always keep these conversations confidential.

Be sensitive to the employee's situation and offer flexibility as much as possible. The employee may need time off to take care of personal matters, such as legal or medical concerns. For a time, a grieving employee may get less work done or experience a drop in productivity. Adjust your expectations temporarily.

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Adjust the employee's initial workload. Some people prefer to stay busy while grieving, but it may also be difficult for them to work at full capacity while they are mourning. Expect the employee to perform their assignments and tasks, but also be reasonable with how productive they can be immediately after coming back. Then adjust their workload over time.

Keep an eye on the employee over the following months. If grief seems to be interfering with their work over a prolonged period of time, suggest that they seek outside support. They might find it helpful to call the assistance program for support. You may also wish to speak with your HR department for further guidance.