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TIPS FOR SUPPORTING GRIEF IN THE WORKPLACE

Talking openly about grief and being supportive to those who are grieving within the workplace doesn't come naturally to most Americans, but not talking about it does come at a cost to the employee, team, and employer.¹ People need to feel supported at work in order to be healthy, productive and creative. Being prepared is crucial to establishing best practices and a healthier working environment and community.

1 CREATE A SAFE CULTURE

Context matters. We live in communities and offices with a particular culture and expectations. How we move forward after death and loss depends on the context and support system available to us. Those who are well supported and feel understood in their workplace are able to move forward more healthily and easily. An organization that has clear values and compassionately cares for its members will be more productive and more successful because of the supportive environment.²

2 LISTEN ALL THE WAY

Listening does not mean placating or checking your watch after a few minutes. Listening is a real act of service, a real gesture of support. Taking the time to listen and to hear someone tell their story, share how they are finding their way forward or how grief is impacting them, giving space to share and laugh, and throw up their arms in despair is all key to successfully listening. It's not about telling your story or sharing your opinion. It's about creating the space and time to be present. [See our tip sheet on effective communication.](#)

3 DON'T ASSUME

While it is easier to make assumptions than taking the time to ask, asking is the only way to know and understand what is really going on.

4 YOU DON'T HAVE TO FIX IT

Nothing is broken. Grief is a natural and normal response to loss and change. Your job isn't to make it better, but to care and support through it.

5 TRY TO UNDERSTAND

Grieving people want to feel understood and know that you "get it" and you can be patient with them as they find their way forward. Imagine a corn maze. If you jump in the middle and try to push someone forward you will likely get lost too. Instead, stay put and encourage exploration while being an understanding cheerleader. You don't know how it feels, but be willing to learn by asking questions to understand.

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6 BE WILLING NOT TO KNOW

More often than not, there are no answers. Clichés and euphemisms are seldom helpful. Instead, be willing to be uncertain. Grief and life altering changes all affect people differently. No two people are the same.

7 THERE IS NO TIMELINE

Grief is cyclical and un-predictable. It is not contained by time so it requires your patience and willingness to bend the rules and rework expectations.

8 MODIFY YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Grief will challenge and limit what someone is capable of doing. Adapt to the grief and the grief will adapt its way back.

9 EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

Grief is unpredictable. People who are grieving often don't feel like themselves or see the way they are falling behind or unable to succeed as they have in the past. If you are prepared, you'll be able to expect the unexpected.

10 BE PREPARED

Preparedness is essential for effectiveness. Having consistent policies and procedures makes a difference when the unexpected happens. By being prepared, you and your team will be properly trained and feel empowered to provide the support that is needed when someone has experienced change or grief. It is not about knowing the right things to say, but having the infrastructure to provide the right support for your context. Without preparedness, grief will come at a cost.³

11 WEEKLY CHECK-INS

In order to understand how it is going for the team and for the employee, schedule regular check-ins to discuss the employee's needs, strategize solutions to temporary challenges, and assess if your practices are working.

12 BE PATIENT

Grief is uncontrollable. Don't expect an employee to be consistent, on target, fast paced, or always mentally present. The environment that is created with patience will actually help an employee find his/her footing again. Rushing them and/or creating consequences will diminish effectiveness.

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13 BE FLEXIBLE

Working regular hours or forcing a grieving person to fit into a mold or prescribed schedule may not be achievable or helpful to the team or employee. Allow for flexibility and a self-identified return to a routine. Maximize times of productivity and promote efficiency.

14 BE CONSISTENT

Grief creates chaos. A consistent environment with clear expectations helps an employee anticipate and plan, helps a team be more patient, and supports a supervisor's management. Consistency helps establish a temporary routine. But, don't be rigid.

15 EVALUATE

Evaluate practices often and remain prepared by having a conversation about culture and practices regularly. Don't wait until grief enters the workplace.

¹ Costs of grief-related loss in productivity: Darlene Gavron Stevens, "The Cost of Grief," Chicago Tribune, August 20, 2003: http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2003-08-20/business/0308200089_1_pet-loss-grief-emotions

² Grief can interfere with job performance: Jane E. Dutton, Kristina M. Workman, and Ashley E. Hardin, "Compassion at Work," *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 1 (2014): 277-304.

³ Long-term investment in employees pays off in a more loyal and productive workforce: James H. Dulebohn, Janice C. Molloy, Shaun M. Pichler, and Brian Murray, "Employee Benefits: Literature Review and Emerging Issues," *Human Resource Management Review* 19 (2009): 86-103; see also Alex Edmans, "The Link between Job Satisfaction and Firm Value, with Implications for Corporate Social Responsibility," *Academy of Management Perspectives* 26 (2012): 1-19; James K. Harter, Frank L. Schmidt, and Theodore L. Hayes, "Business-Unit-Level Relationship between Employee Satisfaction, Employee Engagement, and Business Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 87 (2002): 268-279.