



Tips for Supervisors and Managers: **What to Do When a Co-worker Dies**

Managing the death of a co-worker is impactful to you as the manager and to surviving co-workers and colleagues. When tragic events occur or even when anticipated losses take place, employers and employees alike sometimes struggle with what to say and what to do. Here are some tips to help you respond:

Utilize ACT – Acknowledge, Communicate, Transition (SHRM, 2012).

- **Acknowledge** the tragedy or loss and its human impact. Empathize with grief statements made by employees. Find ways, even in brief or basic statements, to honor the deceased.
- **Communicate** factual and pertinent information with compassion. Provide announcements of ways the team may be offering support to the surviving family members; as appropriate, provide factual details of the death if this information is provided to you.
- **Transition** using ‘future-talk’. As it seems appropriate, and with sensitivity, communicate how the loss will be managed in the work flow – identify what duties will be transitioned to whom.

Ask for support from higher management (OPM, 1996).

- Seek practical help for yourself and offer it to employees. As reasonable and practicable, request and/or offer extended deadlines or assistance in lightening the burden of non-critical duties. Seeking and/or offering a reprieve can make it easier for you and your staff to focus on supporting each other as the team returns to normal functioning.

Recognize grief and trauma in your employees.

- Grief is communicated in many ways. Expressions of anger, sadness, or general distraction are normal in the grieving process. Other signs of grief in the workplace may include lower motivation, low tolerance for workload or co-workers, increased stress, or inability to complete tasks or projects (EAPA, n.d.). Be aware of behaviors that seem out-of-the-norm for your team or specific employees. Communicate your concerns with compassion and offer appropriate task-related or emotional support (APA, 2016; SHRM, 2012). While it may feel uncomfortable, allow your employees to talk openly about their feelings (OPM, 1996).
- If you feel that an employee’s work-related behaviors or patterns have shifted or changed due to the loss, provide them with the number for the **Colorado State Employee Assistance Program (CSEAP) – 1-800-821-8154**. Licensed counselors are available to provide free, confidential counseling to state employees.
- If the employee death took place in the workplace, managers may find themselves responding to employee trauma (EAPA, 2002). While grief symptoms listed above may be present, supervisors may also observe “anxiety and fear” (SHRM, 2012). Unfortunately, trauma contributes to “higher risk of absenteeism, alcohol abuse, anger, disengagement or violence” (SHRM, 2012). Always refer your employees to the **Colorado State Employee Assistance Program (CSEAP) – 1-800-821-8154** if you identify signs of trauma in the workplace. CSEAP staff can work individually with your staff or respond to groups interested in support in the workplace.

Engage with Human Resources (HR) as soon as possible.

- Your HR Office can assign a designated HR contact, as needed, for family members of the deceased. If you receive benefits or technical questions from the family of the deceased, respectfully refer them to the designated HR contact (SHRM, 2012).
- HR can assist with assigning a temporary employee to fulfill the role of the deceased as well as working with you and/or other team leaders on filling the vacant position.

Handle transitions with compassion and respect.

- Respect your employees' need to use leave to attend funeral or memorial services. Seek guidance from your leader(s) if you are concerned about impact to work flow if multiple employees request leave to attend services.
- Consider announcing when the belongings of the deceased employee will be removed from their workspace. Work with HR on developing a plan to pack up these belongings and deliver to a designated family member (SHRM, 2012). It may be helpful to remove belongings before or after normal work hours to minimize disruption in the work setting.
- Moving on is important. Some of your employees may tell you that 'getting back to work' is helpful for them as they manage the loss of their co-worker (OPM, 1996). Encourage employees to get back to normal work rhythms and routines as it works for them. Again, if you identify that an employee or the workgroup is having difficulty transitioning back to their normal work patterns after several weeks, refer them to **Colorado State Employee Assistance Program (CSEAP) – 1-800-821-8154 – for support.**

Sources:

American Psychological Association (APA), 2016. Coping with the death of a co-worker.

Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA), 2002. Identifying traumatic reactions in the workplace.

Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM), 2012. Sudden Death.

United States Office of Personnel Management, Office of Workforce Relations (OPM) 1996. Handling Traumatic Events: A Managers' Handbook.