

# Helping Employees Cope with the Death of a Co-Worker

Arlene S. Hirsch

June 23, 2022

[SHRM.org](https://www.shrm.org)



Helping employees cope with the death of a colleague or co-worker is not typically covered in leadership training or employee handbooks. However, the pandemic and other public health crises have prompted many organizations to create policies that address the needs of grieving employees while still achieving business outcomes.

"Not dealing with grief costs companies billions of dollars in lost revenues," said Blythe Landry, a Nashville, Tenn., area grief coach and author of *Trauma Intelligence: The Art of Helping in a World Filled with Pain* (PYP Academy, 2021). "When employees have trouble focusing on their work, they can end up having accidents or making costly mistakes."

A study conducted by the Grief Recovery Institute found that the annual loss in productivity due to grieving employees exceeds \$75 billion. It also found that grief can impact workplace performance of grieving employees in several ways. For example:

- 90 percent report a reduction in their ability to concentrate following a loss.

- 90 percent of those who work in physical jobs are more likely to get injured due to lack of concentration.
- 70 percent report an increase or new use of alcohol or mood-altering substances.

"If the death is predictable, it can still feel like a punch in the gut when it finally occurs," said Robert VandePol, president of VandePol Crisis Response Services in Holland, Mich. And if the death is unexpected, it can be laced with trauma.

"Nothing prepares you for the death of a close colleague," said Arielle Dance, a project manager at the American Cancer Society (ACS) in Newark, N.J. "If you are a manager or close colleague of the deceased, there's a good chance you will find yourself straddling the uncomfortable divide between grieving your friend and managing the logistics."

As a first-time manager, Dance struggled to know how to handle the death of her close friend and team member. To many of her co-workers, Pat was more like an "office mom" than an office manager, Dance said, so when Pat died unexpectedly while on leave, it was like losing a member of their extended family.

It fell to Dance as her boss to notify the other managers in her department. And at the staff meeting the following Monday morning, she was the one who shared the sad news with the entire office. Although she had worked with HR to prepare a script, her composure slipped when she saw her teammates' eyes well up with tears at the news that their "office mom" had died.

"I went off script and sobbed through the rest of the meeting while my peers held my hand," she said.

### Throw Out the Playbook

"How we show up for our employees during the most painful and traumatic periods of their lives is something they will never forget," said Mita Mallick, head of inclusion, equity and impact at Carta, a financial equity platform based in San Francisco. "These are the moments that matter in a workplace, and sometimes we need to throw out the playbook and acknowledge that someone we know has died."

If a deceased employee worked in a client- or customer-facing role, there is an entire ecosystem of people who will be impacted by the person's death. For Dance, notifying the volunteers who worked closely with Pat in ACS's wig room—where wigs are stored for cancer patients who've lost their hair due to chemotherapy treatments—was another painful part of the process. "I spent the whole day making phone calls because I didn't want them to read about Pat's death in an e-mail or an obituary. I wanted them to hear the news from someone they knew," she said.

"A person's role in the organization doesn't matter," explained Linda Lindsey, an employee assistance manager for ProMedica in Toledo, Ohio. "What matters is the impact the person had on the organization. When a housekeeper in our hospital system passed, everyone who came into contact with her was grieving the loss and wanted to share their stories about her."

## Developing a Plan of Action

As the former president of the Crisis Care Network in Grandville, Mich., VandePol was instrumental in developing a crisis communication process that organizations can use to shape and guide their response to an employee's death. This approach is captured in the acronym ACT:

### *Acknowledge*

- Accurately convey the facts and avoid conjecture.
- Acknowledge that not everyone will be impacted in exactly the same way.
- Acknowledge that the employee's death has an impact on you personally.

### *Communicate*

- Provide information with compassion and competence in order to reduce the likelihood of rumors, build trust and provide a sense of order that supports moving forward.

### *Transition*

- Communicate an expectation of recovery that creates a hopeful vision of the future.
- Communicate flexible and reasonable accommodations as people progress to a new normal.

Although the employee's boss is usually the designated point person, many people managers are ill-equipped to deal with this challenge. Rather than avoid it, HR should urge managers to adapt their leadership style to meet the moment, said Anthony Casablanca, co-founder of GriefLeaders LLC, a grief leadership training company in Cincinnati and co-author of *The Dying Art of Leadership* (BookBaby, 2020). "Don't let being uncomfortable get in the way of doing the right thing," he said.

## The HR Imperative

"HR can be the beacon of culture and a catalyst of reason," Mallick said. How HR professionals show up in the darkest hours can build strong employee loyalty to the organization.

"Leadership matters more than policy. Employees will remember less about their employer's policies and more about how company leadership treated them," Casablanca said. "Caring can go a long way toward healing."

The central role of HR is to help organizations determine how to speak to its people—especially during a time of crisis—either directly or by enabling a manager to have that conversation, said Ken Matos, director of people science at Culture Amp, a people and culture platform in New York City. "We want people to know that we aren't just going to clean this desk and replace them without acknowledging what has been lost."

Conversely, "it's not the manager's job to be a therapist, and group discussions should not become group therapy sessions," he said. "You still have to have functional conversations about how to get the work done."

Casablanca recommends that HR professionals work closely with managers to help them adapt their leadership style to meet the moment in the following ways:

- Emphasize the importance of engaging with employees rather than ignoring the problem and hoping it will disappear.
- Stress the value of listening with empathy and compassion.
- Brainstorm ways to address the issue directly depending on individual needs and circumstances, such as by referring employees to a counselor; reducing caseloads or work hours for grieving employees; or offering additional support, if necessary.
- Be vulnerable and engage the team in solving the problem.

"Get everyone involved so you can move forward as a team," Casablanca said.

HR can also be instrumental in helping employees find ways to honor their deceased co-workers' contributions and legacy, which might include memorial services and celebrations, memorial plaques, fundraisers, and scholarships.

When Pat died in late 2019, ACS planned to honor her memory by creating a plaque for the wig room. However, when the facility closed during the pandemic and the team was furloughed, much of the work that Pat would have done ground to a standstill. Yet Dance was determined not to allow Pat's memory to be erased. When it was time to hire Pat's replacement, Dance shared Pat's legacy with new hires to ensure they understood the emotional importance of the role they were taking on.

### The Value of EAPs

Employee assistance programs (EAPs) can often provide critical services when a co-worker dies, said Cheryl Raudenbush, executive director of Mazzitti and Sullivan EAP Services in Harrisburg, Pa.

"Any time your employees are impacted to the point where they are not able to function to capacity, it can be helpful to bring in an EAP counselor [or a grief counselor] who can help organizations respond to the death in a timely manner," she said.

The EAP counselor can lead employees through a shared grief process that gives them the time and space they need to mourn and heal, Raudenbush said. Most counselors can work remotely or in person, either with groups or one-on-one with employees who need more individualized attention.

There are additional considerations, however, when the death involves a senior-level executive who has a widespread impact on the organization. In some instances, it may be necessary to bring in an outside consultant or interim executive to help manage the process.

When Dave Goldberg, the late CEO of SurveyMonkey, died unexpectedly while vacationing in Mexico, his death rocked the foundation of the company that he led. To help them address the daunting challenge of carrying on without his leadership, senior leaders decided to bring in an interim CEO with close ties to Goldberg to help shepherd them through the process.

While Goldberg's untimely death highlights the importance of having a succession plan in place to help ensure the continuity of the organization, it also speaks to the importance of resilience in the face of tragedy.

"Business doesn't prepare us for death at the office," Casablanca said. But competent, compassionate leadership can go a long way toward mitigating the risks to the organization while still prioritizing the well-being of those left behind, he said.

*Arlene Hirsch is a career counselor and author based in Chicago.*

This article is reprinted with permission from the Society for Human Resource Management ([SHRM.org](https://www.shrm.org)), c 2022. All rights reserved.