

## **Managers and Supervisors Assisting Team Members after the Death of a Member of the Team**

### Guidelines for Managers and Supervisors

When team members are affected by the death of another team member, personal loss, or serious illness, managers and supervisors are faced with the challenge of insuring that team members are adequately supported while work responsibilities are being met.

### How Are Team Member's Affected?

Team members working in departments who have experienced the loss of another team member due to death may experience a number of feelings over the days and weeks following the death. This is because strong personal bonds are often formed within work groups, and the experience of grieving a co-worker's death can be profound. The intensity of reactions will vary among individuals, but the following experiences are common:

- numbness, shock and disbelief
- decreased concentration and memory
- increased anxiety
- sleep disturbances, fatigue
- change in eating habits
- sadness, tearfulness
- headaches, muscle tension, stomach ache
- irritability, frustration
- depression, emptiness

### How is the Workplace Impacted?

Departments and teams that have recently experienced a loss due to death are presented with a number of issues. There may be difficulties with productivity and attendance for those most affected by the loss. If new information about the deceased emerges at the time of death, or if events surrounding the death are upsetting, some employees may be shocked, anxious or confused.

Decisions about the deceased employee's possessions, work space and job responsibilities have to be made and it is critical that these decisions be made with a sensitivity for all those affected. There might be feelings of guilt, resentment or uneasiness for team members who assume roles previously handled by the deceased team member and their may even in the future be resentment toward the replacement. Also, certain work situations may serve as reminders of the loss, and may trigger grief reactions unexpectedly.

It is important to understand that the emotional environment at work will be changed for a period of time, and that each team member will have their own unique reaction to the loss. It is critical that management and supervisors acknowledge and discuss the impact of the death in an appropriate and sensitive manner. It is also critical that a manager and/or supervisor not min. Most organizations that have an EAP arrange for EAP representatives to be on site to assist the organization in addressing and managing the loss of the team member.

### What Steps Should Supervisors Take

- ◆ Be aware first of all of your organization's policies and procedures regarding notification of team members, type of notification and content, time to attend support groups, or even what is allowed in terms of attending memorials.
- ◆ If you find out about a death, immediately notify Human Resources to make sure they can begin to implement notification policies.
- ◆ Be aware of and sensitive toward one another. There may be team members who have experienced personal losses during the past year or so and are still grieving that loss.
- ◆ Know that team members will utilize this time to provide support and "story telling" to one another as a way of coping with the loss. Mutual support and sharing among team members should be encouraged.
- ◆ Be sensitive and straightforward. Create an atmosphere of open communication for everyone. Make contact with any grieving employee as soon as possible. It is important to acknowledge their grief and loss openly, even though it may feel awkward to initiate a conversation. Feel free to share a caring reaction to their loss while being sensitive to the confidential nature of personal or medical information.
- ◆ Expect to do more listening than talking. Patience, compassion optimism and availability are helpful qualities to demonstrate. Be sure to ask what you can share and what is confidential, and ask about specific things you can do to help.
- ◆ Don't be surprised if the employee needs to talk about the loss many times, especially during holidays and anniversaries, which may be very difficult. It is common for people who have experienced a loss to exhibit periodic tears, low spirits and uneven productivity for a while.
- ◆ Accept that job performance and even personal interactions may be affected. Each person grieves a loss differently but concentration loss is common to many.
- ◆ In areas that are sensitive, it is important to interact with family members. For example, while a member of management should be present, having a family member or family-designated friend pick up personal items rather than having someone at work hand them a pre-packed box is important.
- ◆ Remember that while the death may not have a direct impact on you, do not assume that everyone else is ok.

- ◆ Grief can last quite a while. Don't expect a quick recovery. The process is different for everyone. The supervisor's job is to create an accepting environment, where the process of grieving is treated as normal, yet work still gets done. If an individual seems to be slipping into depression and you are concerned about the level or severity of their reaction, contact Human Resources and/or the EAP.

#### Who Should Make Notification and How?

Each organization should have a policy and procedure in place regarding notifications. Best practices include the following:

- ◆ Prior to any notification confirm as many facts of the incident as possible.
- ◆ Receive authorization to release factual, confirmed information and clarify specific information that is permissible to release. There may be confidential, medical or investigative information disclosed to you that cannot be released to the work group.
- ◆ Don't be a "lone ranger" and get information out without going through Human Resources.
- ◆ Take a personal approach to the notification by asking the deceased's manager or supervisor who has had a working relationship with the deceased to be the speaker announcing the death.
- ◆ Utilize a team approach with at least two people making the announcement. This helps to reduce the professional and personal pressure that might be felt by those making the announcement. Remember that they had a relationship with the deceased as well.
- ◆ Notify face-to-face particularly with the deceased members work group. Telephone calls or emails may be permissible with groups who did not have a more personal relationship with the deceased.

#### How Do You Say a Death Has Occurred?

Examples include:

- ◆ "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."
- ◆ "I've just been informed of news I need to share with you."

Avoid:

- ◆ "Time heals all wounds."
- ◆ "Well, there are in a better place."
- ◆ "Life goes on."

Other Steps to Take:

- ◆ Contact the EAP (800) 343-4670, (813) 870-0392 or (727) 576-5164