

A QUESTION of LEADERSHIP

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At any given time, one-fourth or more of the workforce is grieving. It may be sorrow over the death of a loved one, a family member's terminal or debilitating illness, a divorce, or some other traumatic life change. Leaders inevitably face situations in which they must balance offering support to employees in these difficult circumstances with meeting the needs of the organization. Doing this requires walking a fine line, and a leader's effectiveness in this balancing act can make the difference between retaining or losing valued employees.

It's not unusual for employers to expect people to take a short time off to deal with their grief but then get on with business as usual. After all, companies have production schedules and quotas to meet. Similarly, co-workers are often willing to be supportive of a grieving individual for a while but may begin to lose patience if that person needs more time to recover and return to functioning "normally"—particularly when the

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co-workers have to pick up the slack in production.

Appropriate organizational policy, procedures, culture, awareness, and support are critical factors in helping leaders balance the needs of grieving individuals with the needs of the organization. If these factors are in place when an employee experiences a crisis, leaders don't have to guess about how to manage the situation or be torn between the organization's expectations and the individual's need for support.

Following are some issues that leaders should consider when establishing policies and an organizational culture that support grieving employees without excessively disturbing the operation of the organization:

- A realistic approach to bereavement leave and the loss of a loved one may require allowing more time than the three days most companies allow. Establish a list of family members covered under the bereavement leave policy, and consider whether the organization should be flexible enough to grant exceptions.
- A special fund, catastrophic leave bank, or employee loan account can help grieving employees with funeral and travel expenses and time off.
- A flexible work schedule can help grieving employees who need to seek counseling, help children adjust, or take care of financial matters.
- Employee assistance programs can be valuable tools when employees, family members, and co-workers need counseling.

Supporting a grieving employee is important, but leaders should also have a plan in place for managing the employee's co-workers. Is there a procedure for obtaining whatever information the employee is willing to share with the rest of the organization? Can co-workers take time off to attend a funeral or visit their grieving colleague? If the employee will be off the job for an extended period, what are the leader's options for redistributing the workload equitably? All these questions should be answered beforehand, through organizational policy.

Managing a situation in which an employee is grieving over an outside event is one thing, but what can leaders do when it is the employee who becomes seriously ill or dies? Again, policy and organizational culture are critical.

Establish procedures for helping a deceased employee's family file for death and pension benefits, for providing an at-work memorial service and on-site counseling to help colleagues work through the healing process, and for removing the employee's personal effects.

Perhaps the most important thing leaders can do when people are grieving is to be visible. Walk around, communicate with people individually and in groups, and offer support. These actions, when complemented by established policy and a supportive organizational culture, are key to meeting the needs of grieving employees and their co-workers while also maintaining an effective and productive organization.

How can leaders best support employees who are experiencing a crisis away from work—such as a death or serious illness in the family—and also continue to meet the needs of the organization?

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In her book *Helping Yourself Help Others: A Book for Caregivers*, former first lady Rosalynn Carter writes that there are only four kinds of people in the world: those who have been caregivers, those who are caregivers, those who will be caregivers, and those who will need caregivers. Most people who are thrust into the role of looking after a loved one also work full-time jobs. The demands of meeting one's responsibilities as both a caregiver and an employee can result in stress and fatigue, which in turn can be manifested in the workplace as decreased productivity, concentration, and decision-making ability; increased absenteeism and tardiness; and irritability and withdrawal.

What can leaders do to support caregiver employees while still holding these employees to performance expectations that keep the organization on track? First, there is a lot at stake. Being a caregiver requires commitment, diligence, loyalty, organization, hard work, stamina, and creativity—the same traits that are most valued in employees. Caregivers are typically the type of employees who are willing to go the extra mile. But if they feel they are not being supported by the organization and its policies, they may feel forced to make a choice between the organization and those they care for.

Most leaders know that their success and the success of their organizations depend on their people. So it's important for organizations and leaders to support caregiver employees. To do so, leaders need to be intimately familiar with the needs of caregivers and the policies, strategies, and sources that are in place—both inside and outside the organization—to help meet those needs. People who suddenly find themselves in a caregiving situation may have little knowledge of how to provide personal care, little experience with negotiating the medical and insurance systems, and little understanding of the benefits and risks of medical procedures. In addition, they often face a significant financial burden along with emotional turmoil.

Leaders need to be ready with information on sources of support for caregivers in all these areas. They should know about the provisions of the Family and Medical Leave Act, government programs that provide in-home care, and sources of education in health- and caregiving-related matters; be up to date on the organization's policies on flexible work schedules, job sharing, and leave for caregivers; and understand how coworkers and the organization's employee assistance program can help with compassion, counseling, and other emotional support.

Sometimes it's tough for leaders to help because they're not aware of an employee's caregiving situation. Caregivers who are displaying signs of stress are often unwilling to seek help. So leaders' first task is to deter-

mine the source of the warning signs—usually by asking the employee, in a straightforward but concerned manner, about his or her situation.

The next step is to prepare to meet with the employee by reviewing his or her job description and past performance. Then, after looking for areas where the organization can be flexible, leaders should determine what the performance expectations are for the employee one month, three months, and six months down the road. Finally, armed with information on how the employee can get support from the organization and elsewhere, leaders should arrange a one-on-one meeting.

At these meetings leaders should first of all be empathetic. They should ascertain the details of the employee's caregiver responsibilities and go over the various possibilities for support. At the same time, leaders need to review the employee's performance and clearly state what is expected regarding future performance. With ideas and input from the employee, the two parties should arrive at a mutual agreement on how the employee can receive support as a caregiver and at the same time meet work expectations. A follow-up meeting should be set for a month later to discuss progress.

Leaders have a key role in helping employees deal with the anxiety and stress of caregiving and at the same time maintain their value to the organization. The best way for leaders to fulfill this role is by displaying concern, knowledge, and honesty.