

# Working Through the Death of a Colleague

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It's been nearly a year since the loss of my staff member, colleague, and friend. Just three months prior to her unexpected passing, I moderated a webinar for my company, titled "Grief and Loss in the Workplace." We shared coping mechanisms and resources with staff. We reminded them about our company's employee assistance program and pointed them to external resources available to them for support.

But coping with a colleague's death is not something we're coached on in leadership trainings or company handbooks. Can you ever be prepared for getting the call telling you your colleague is gone? For sharing the news with your entire staff? For cleaning out their desk, full of handwritten notes and personal reminders of your friend?

As our society has entered into a reality of collective grief following a pandemic that has claimed more than 200,000 lives so far, it is even more urgent that we understand how to help one another get through loss. In sharing my experience of managing my team through grief, I hope I can help ease the process.

If you are a manager or close colleague of the deceased, chances are you will find yourself — as I did — straddling the uncomfortable divide of grieving your friend and managing logistics.

I was not prepared for these challenges. But in reflecting on my own experience, I've identified a few steps leaders can take to both manage their own emotions and help steer their organization and teams through this difficult and emotional time. Here are the most important lessons I learned in the time following a loss that deeply affected my workplace community and spirit.

## Be Authentic with Your Team

I work in cancer care. My colleagues and I are caregivers and survivors ourselves, so we understand the impact of death. But until the death of our colleague, my local office had remained shielded from the personal grief of losing someone we work with. We did not think we had to prepare for *this* type of loss.

As a manager, I was the first person in my office to be notified of my staff member's passing. Once I composed myself — literally, I picked myself up off a restaurant floor — I called the other managers in my department. We cried together. We planned. We organized a staff meeting first thing in the morning so we could notify everyone at the same time.

The next day, with a prepared script from HR in hand, I told my peers that our "office mom" would not be back. But as I watched noses go red and eyes fill up with tears as my staff realized that no one would bring in English Muffins or Entenmann's treats anymore, I went off script and sobbed through the meeting. My teammate, another manager, held my hand and sobbed with me.

Grief is a natural stage of life, but our society often wants to rush right through it. That day with my staff, I did the opposite. As managers and leaders, we often feel pressure to remain poised and in

control when things fall apart, but sometimes we need to display vulnerability, not composure. Hold a space for your staff to express their emotions freely. By showing them that there is no shame in authentic emotion, you're giving them a platform to experience their own processes of grieving.

I gave my team the space to feel, process, and share stories that day, and I can still see how important that step has been for all of us today.

## **Remember that Your Plan is Not Necessarily Everyone Else's Plan**

As the manager of the deceased, I am the person that the family still contacts for questions, that HR requires to fill out paperwork, and that IT pesters for equipment. But while I am the point person, I have little control over the actual process.

My original plan was to begin clearing her desk out after a month or so. I was going to wait to hear from her family about what they wanted to do with her belongings. I thought it should still look like her space for a while — it didn't feel right to start removing pieces of her yet. But within days, IT requested the return of her computer. I became overwhelmed with hunting down every piece of equipment she had signed out when all I wanted to do was lay down and cry.

Within a week of the funeral service, my staff's family members asked to come in and clear her personal items. I planned ahead to have them come in on a quiet day, when not too many people would be in the office. But my plan was not their plan — they were already on the way. They arrived with boxes and bags. They wanted to toss things that I treasured and keep things I had to shred for confidentiality purposes.

Prepare your heart for the unexpected. Every person and family handle the grieving process differently. Some families may not want to come in right away, or at all. Some may ask you to ship items of importance. Some may get upset if you touch belongings. There is no right or wrong way to handle these processes but having open communication with the family and your office leadership is essential. Remembering logistics like keys and files are helpful, but the family may not know where everything is. Be patient with them. They — like you — are doing their best.

## **Communicate Your Grief Clearly**

One day I came home heavy with grief and my spouse asked how my day was. I said, "I spent my day erasing my friend."

In the first month, I tried to ignore the flood of emails from HR, IT, and other departments. I wanted to say: "No, you cannot have the computer she used for years and created birthday cards on. No, you cannot have the headset she wore that scrunched down her curls. No, I will not fill out separation paperwork — because she wasn't separated. She was ripped from us, permanently. I lost her. We all lost her. And I didn't want her to leave." I felt the company was unknowingly rushing my grief.

Remember that humans are (usually) understanding, but they are not mind readers. Communicate with your colleagues if you feel overwhelmed with expectations like these. When I finally explained to IT why I'd been ignoring their requests, the IT representative expressed her own feelings of grief and

shared memories of working with our late staff member. During this season of loss, unexpected interactions like these helped me realize that my colleague's graciousness had touched nearly everyone she interacted with. Her memory would not be erased.

## **Use the Buddy System When It is Time to Hire a New Colleague**

In the back of my mind I was aware that, at some point, I would have to hire someone to fill my late colleague's role. But how would I ever be able to replace her? Management reminded me that I didn't need to rush my hiring process. Yet, within a week, the emails began, asking if I was ready to discuss candidates.

Luckily, my supervisor has always been understanding and suggested that I bring in a colleague to help me screen candidates. I remember my supervisor asking, "If someone asks you about the current climate or culture in your office, are you prepared to discuss that?" I honestly wasn't. And if they asked me about the previous person in the role? Again, I was not ready. I was grateful for the support of my team members during the hiring process. Nothing may really prepare you for what to say about your friend who you lost but having a buddy during the hiring process can give you a boost of energy and support.

Finding the balance of what to say and when to disclose information about the deceased is up to you. Once we brought on a new hire, I did not want to scare them off, but I did want to be honest and let them know that they had big shoes to fill. For me, it was important for our new hire to know the legacy they are now a part of.

## **Find a Way to Keep the Memory Alive**

Now, it is time to honor her memory. I do not have all the answers, but my team and I are discussing ways to honor her legacy. We have already fundraised over \$4,000 for her favorite charity, in partnership with one of her daughters. As we approach the one-year mark of her passing, we are still considering other deserving ways to honor her.

Find a way to honor your team member that best reflects the work they did and the work they would have done. Ask your staff how they want to see your team member honored. Those people who were quiet during the earlier stages of grieving may feel drawn to a project like this.

My current goal is to help my staff heal and to not rush their grieving, or my own. I want everyone to know that it's okay to be sad when you pass her desk, or see a meeting invite that still bears her name.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, I spent days thinking of how my friend would have handled the frenzy that ensued. Regardless of her high risk, she would have baked my favorite cake and left it on my porch. She would have searched for the last bottles of hand sanitizer for whoever needed them. She would have offered to grocery shop for cancer survivors.

It's alright to linger in the quiet moments when you remember the sound of her voice or laugh. We do not have to feel bad for laughing at stories or pictures of her. As a team, we can keep her legacy alive by caring for the cancer survivors and volunteers who she adored.