How Leaders Can Support Employees after a Loss or Trauma

When a workplace receives news related to the serious illness or sudden death of a co-worker or someone they worked with, the spectrum of emotions and variety of behaviors can leave management feeling confused about the best way to respond. Employee reactions vary related to factors such as age, cultural norms, spiritual beliefs, and closeness to the person who is sick or died. Individuals may be impacted in the way they think, feel, react physically, or relate socially. Supportive responses by managers allow for individual reactions and also validate the core human need for a sense of belonging. Compassionate and confident management responses during such times enable the workplace to stabilize and resume smooth operation.

Typical Reactions to Traumatic Events, Loss or Death:

Shocked (confused or dazed)	Anger (outbursts)	Appears unaffected
Disbelief	Disorganization	Blaming or critical of leadership
Numbness	Sadness / Tears	Difficulty focusing
Demands for more information	Silent or withdrawn	Physical Distress (fatigue, nausea)

Managing Grief, Loss, and Trauma:

- Recovery takes time, and every person responds to loss in a unique way.
- The manager's role is not to manage feelings, but to create an environment where work progresses as employees move through their feelings.
- Your caring support and professionalism sets a beneficial and long-lasting example for the workforce.
- Do not ignore the impact that loss might have on staff. Demonstrate that management understands that this can be a difficult time. Showing that you understand and care will help boost morale for employees.
- Assess the impact on both individual employees and the workgroup. The EAP can provide valuable coaching and supportive resource for managers on how to support the workforce.
- Don't forget to take care of yourself during this critical time.

Supportive Actions You Can Take:

- Provide as much information as you are authorized to give as soon as possible (regarding what happened, memorial arrangements, etc.), and assure staff that updates will be given as new information is received.
- Simply acknowledge the loss or trauma. The wrong thing to say is nothing at all.
- Avoid comparisons to your own loss. Grief experiences differ with each individual.
- Stay in touch with employees who must leave or have not yet returned to the workplace.
- Often grieving employees are too numb or overwhelmed to communicate what they need. Inquire whether an employee has special needs such as privacy, reduced work hours, or help to catch up on their workload.
- A reassuring touch can communicate care, but avoid touching without permission.
- Remember holidays and anniversaries can be especially difficult times for a grieving person.
- Help the workgroup take action: collect money for flowers for the family; a memorial potluck at work; place a blank journal at the work station of the deceased and allow staff to write memories, then gift it to the family.
- Remind employees of the confidential, no-cost benefit of the EAP.

"*Of all the reactions to trauma, resilience is the most common"* (Bonanno, 2004). Most employees return to normal functioning following an incident of loss, but occasionally an individual experiences performance difficulties. If needed, address specific job performance concerns and make a compassionate referral to the EAP. An impacted employee may need help from EAP in order to return to expected standards of performance.