

Coworkers Facing Grief Together

The news hits hard – a coworker has died. Maybe you knew the person really well, maybe you didn't, but in either case the news momentarily freezes you, prompting you to consider the fragility of life and the priorities you bring to it.

Perhaps, at least for a moment, work doesn't seem all that important anymore. But very quickly reality sets in, along with a sense of not knowing what to do next. You have a job to do. Life goes on. People around you are confused. There is no employee manual for this, no training and no expectation. But there are ways to cope, to honor the deceased without long-term disruption in the workplace.

First Things First

The nature of one's response to the news of a coworker's death depends on the nature of the relationship. Close friends and longtime associates logically will have a deeper level of grief. Company management may or may not officially acknowledge the occasion with activities. If the deceased was a manager or executive, the company may logically be more formal in its recognition. It is normal for a business organization to be more formal the more well-known the deceased person. But regardless of the dynamics, certain responses are logical, expected, and beneficial.

First, don't be afraid to talk to your peers about your feelings. Remember the deceased, whether it's an informal gathering in the break room or an official company meeting. Talk about how it makes you feel, and listen as your peers do the same. Work it out together. If management doesn't officially acknowledge the loss, ask your supervisor or the deceased's manager for support in making the time for employees to grieve together. Employees who meet together often generate wonderful ideas for how to support the family of the deceased and commemorate the person's life.

The Power of Being Proactive

In addition to talking it out, it is helpful to actually do something in response to the news. Organize a fundraiser to help the family, or to make a contribution that honors the deceased. Create some form of memorial, either temporary – such as a collection of flowers and cards on the property – or a plaque. Maybe plant a tree on the grounds. Be sure to get management's approval for these activities, which in most cases will be supported.

Many companies have established Employee Assistance Programs that provide grief counseling and other assistance in these situations.

Don't hesitate to avail yourself of this resource, especially if you were close to the deceased or if you have strong feelings about how the company is responding. The counselor can facilitate a support group, although you should count on doing the talking and giving each other support. You'll resent a counselor trying to tell you how you feel who isn't part of your workgroup. Grief is personal and everyone reacts differently. People are often surprised by their own response. Don't judge a coworker's reaction that is different than yours. A coworker who has experienced a recent death in their family may appear to react more strongly than others.

There's no easy way to address your grief. But the important thing is to find a positive way to address it, to share it with coworkers, and to proactively honor the deceased. And if the process allows you to realign your priorities to get more out of life and work going forward, then at least something good will have come out of the experience.

