

How to support your team members during difficult times

By [Hayley van der Woude](#)

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Our news feeds are filled with content around the devastating effect that Covid-19 has had on business. But less spoken about is the grief employees feel if a colleague, manager or client passes away from the virus.



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Teams are already trying to deal with the stressors of these uncertain times: safety concerns, fear of job loss, new ways of working, and personal worries about family, home schooling, and income streams to name a few. Losing a fellow team member is an unexpected gut punch.

This was brought into stark relief for us this past week with the loss of the CEO of one of our clients. We were all shaken not just for having known him in a professional capacity, but for our knowledge of the impact he'd made in his sector, for the lives he'd touched.

For most of us, death and grief aren't exactly dinner-time conversation topics, yet the past year has seen them take up residence in our homes, thoughts and conversations - the shadowy, uneasy companions of these pandemic days.

For businesses already struggling to keep up productivity levels under the burden of lockdowns, what is the best way to handle staff mourning the death of a colleague or client? As a manager, you have to navigate the fine line between being compassionate and supportive while staying professional and keeping the company productive. How you handle it is a test of your leadership.

While I don't have all the answers, I've been fortunate enough to experience genuine empathy within our business and from our clients during difficult times. Based on that, we can share the following advice:

Have plans in place

Any company, big or small, should plan for the risk that a senior executive could pass away. Every senior executive needs to have a trusted and capable reportee working closely with them so that if they are ill or pass away, the business can carry on without interruption. This may sound callous, but it's important to protect the livelihood of your team. Give strategic thought to how the business would cope if the MD/CEO/founder, or any other senior executive suddenly passed away. Could the business pick itself up the next day and continue with its operations?



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If tragedy strikes within the team

In the tragic event of someone passing away, put a forum in place for staff to express their feelings. This could be via an internal digital platform or a social media page that offers closed memberships. Staff should be encouraged to post how they feel about the death, offer their condolences, and express their fears.

If you can, it is incredibly valuable to have mental health counsellors available to assist staff members struggling with the news of the death. This should be offered free of charge to staff and in a confidential manner.

An open flow of communication

Keep up a constant flow of communication to staff and to other stakeholders, and be prepared for employee bereavement. People feel numbed when a death happens and they want to hear how others are feeling. They want news about the family and even about what the individual had done in their life. Even if staff hadn't worked closely with the person who passed, they may want to know more about their family or their previous career. If possible, share with staff comments from the deceased's family about their experience and feelings. This can be very authentic and reassuring.

Use the company's LinkedIn page to announce the passing of the person, and encourage other people to post their feelings about the person.

Practical arrangements

Find out and be prepared to share delivery addresses for people to send flowers or other tokens for the family. See if staff members and other stakeholders can participate in a memorial service or funeral - perhaps via digital means.

Communication from the highest source is critical to assure staff that their jobs are safe and that the business is continuing to operate. As soon as possible, advise staff about any changes in reporting lines and who will take on the deceased person's work responsibilities, whether in a temporary or permanent capacity.

Show employees support

Being a supportive manager is one of the most valuable things you can do right now. The pandemic has had a tremendous effect on people's mental well-being, with a [global study](#) of employees finding the mental health of almost 42% of respondents had declined since the outbreak began. The crisis of a death in the workplace brings added trauma and grief into the mix, and can significantly impact productivity, and people's ability to focus and to be resilient.

With employees working remotely, it can be hard to spot the signs that someone is struggling with what has happened, and that their mental health is suffering. Check in with your team on a regular basis and communicate more than you think you need to. This was important before Covid-19, but has become more crucial than ever.

If someone tells you they're battling to cope, take time to listen to how they're doing and show compassion. Ask questions about what support they require. Sometimes staff simply want a sounding board, or the chance to explain that the situation is sapping their strength.

Remember to carry on checking in with them from time to time to see if further help is needed.



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When an employee loses a loved one

If an employee has lost a loved one, your support will be invaluable. Make contact with your bereaved employee as soon as possible, and offer your condolences. Listen, and expect sadness and tears. Be as flexible as you can in allowing them time and space to deal with their grief. Ask how they'd like you to keep in touch and when the best time for you to contact them is. At all times be authentic. Your goal in reaching out is because you value them as a person - not that you're concerned about what their absence will mean for the company.

Grief is a complex emotion and everyone deals with it differently, so read up about grief's various stages to understand how to show support and sensitivity when your employee returns to work. Be patient and reasonable in your work expectations, and adjust their workload if needed.

Ways to show support

Sending flowers is the traditional way of showing people that we care but there are other, more practical ways to offer support. Making dinner or tidying the house may seem exhausting to your employee or client at this time, so order pre-made meals online that can be frozen, and have them delivered to their home.

If the employee is a single parent without much support, chat to colleagues to see if anyone can help with school drop-offs during this time. You could also book a SweepSouth home servicer to help around the house for a few hours or the day, or one of their child caregivers to look after children for a few hours.

Your behaviour as a manager

As much as we all want things at work to just return to the way things were, they won't. Trust that your staff are trying their hardest, and be flexible and generous in helping them thrive during these unprecedented times.

Build good relationships with team members, so that you know them well enough to recognise any warning signs that they're struggling. Encourage them to talk to you. People need different things at different times, so expect that their needs will continue to change.

Helping staff through tricky times is one of the most crucial experiences in interacting with employees. People will always remember how you treated them and how you handled the moment.

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