

## DEATH AND THE WORKPLACE

### **Co-Worker or family member, companies need to understand effects on employee performance.**

Death has been a part of life for thousands of years. But whether it is the loss of a member of our personal family or our corporate family, we still have a great difficulty in dealing with death.

Death is an important issue for employers and employees because it will affect both, whether the loss is a member of a fellow employee's family, or the loss is a fellow employee themselves. How we deal with that death will determine how great an impact it has on both the company and the individuals.

One of the reasons a fellow employee's death is so traumatic is that it brings our own mortality to the forefront. It makes us realize "it can happen to me." It will affect the employees' concentration and effectiveness for a time.

A death in a co-worker's family is just as important, and perhaps more difficult to deal with. We often avoid the bereaved for fear of not knowing what to say, but that is exactly the wrong approach.

Avoiding the bereaved for fear of saying the wrong thing will isolate them and make them feel even more of a loss. Be there for the bereaved.

Co-workers are even more unsure, and thus tend to give the impression of not caring, when an 'invisible death' is involved. 'Invisible deaths' are still births, miscarriages and the death of an elderly parent. Even though it may be expected and considered natural, the death of an elderly parent still irrevocably changes an individual's life and has to be dealt with.

Rather than being afraid to talk to the bereaved, I suggest asking how they are feeling and coping with the loss, and whether they want to talk about it.

An employee who has suffered the death of a loved one may frequently be late or absent from work, and lack concentration when they are at work. There may also be physical reactions such as loss of appetite or over-eating, sleeplessness and fatigue or hyperactivity. These reactions will often result in lack of productivity, creativity and motivation. It is these results which will directly affect the company and other individual employees.

Management spends much time and money on training staff to perform their jobs, but ignores the issue of death and what effect it has on the workplace. Little has been written or made available to help companies develop the skills necessary to support and assist a bereaved worker. This lack of knowledge can result in a significant financial loss, but even more importantly it can actually be detrimental to the healing process of the bereaved. In 1991 statistics show that there were 71,000 deaths in Ontario.

It is important to understand grief is a normal, natural process and takes time to evolve. Vital parts of the healing process include the ability and opportunity to express grief. The bereaved need to be reassured that their reactions are normal and acceptable. Because it is so complex, grief affects different people in different ways.

Shock is often the first stage. The numbness protects the bereaved from the full reality of the loss. Some bereaved use denial as a protection, acting as though nothing has happened, even to the point of continuing to talk about the deceased as though he or she were still alive.

Others will seem to withdraw from their former friends and co-workers, while some will express their grief through anger at either co-workers or the deceased.

Tears are also an important part of the grieving process, although women tend to cry more readily than men. In either case, a private spot and a sympathetic ear are usually appreciated.

As well as the symptoms of grief, managers should also be aware there is no time limit to grief. Just when co-workers feel the grieving is over, it may just be peaking.

Companies and their managers can help the bereaved by understanding the grief process, listening effectively, avoiding clichés and adjusting their expectations. This will not only help the bereaved through the grief period, it will strengthen the commitment and loyalty to the employer and co-workers.

Companies affected by the death of an employee may want to consider some way of recognizing the individual and the contribution he or she made to the company, as well as how it can offer support to the family. It may also be necessary to offer support to co-workers.