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ADR at work

Preventing disputes at work: dealing with grief in the workplace

Shirli Kirschner

> What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery, and without it, all the rest are not only useless but disastrous.
>
> Thomas Merton, from the Meditations on Grief workshop materials.

The information in this article comes from a workshop run by Jan Sunoo from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service and Brenda Paik Sunoo, a journalist and grief recovery counsellor. The aim of the workshop was to raise awareness of an issue that is the subject of very little study in the workplace: supporting workers and co-workers during times of loss.

At any time people in the workplace may be suffering from grief. This could be due to the death of a spouse, parent, child or friend. It could be the result of divorce or separation, a trauma such as a serious illness or being the victim of a crime, or the stress associated with retrenchment, termination or immigration.

In raising the question, it became evident that everyone in the room had a story that they wanted to share. Yet the dominant view in the room was that the workplace (if not society in general) is neither comfortable with nor skilled about how to handle grief or how to open dialogue to assist in the healing. In this summary I have followed the dialogue from the workshop: how this workshop arose, guidelines from the group on common problems, hints, and finally some general guidelines and the practical tips for companies.

How this workshop came into being

Brenda was working as a senior editor in a new job when their son's school phoned through to say that Tommy had collapsed on the basketball court. He died. This led Brenda and Jan on a personal journey through their own grief including involvement with The Compassionate Friends — a non-profit organisation for bereaved parents. The juxtaposition of how Brenda's employer helped by giving her time and space and how others were hindered by having to deal with their grief while being forced to negotiate the mire of bureaucracy at work led to an ➢

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➢ awareness of the need for this issue to be squarely addressed.

Common problems

Through reflecting on their own experience, people in the workshop identified some common issues in the workplace.

- Being strung up by 'shoulds': 'You should be over your wife's death by now; you should work to get over it; you should avoid thinking about it. Three days leave should be sufficient.' Everyone grieves differently: the consensus was that 'should' enhances the feeling of powerlessness felt by the grieving person.
- Company policies: in general, company policies seemed conspicuous by their absence. The standard provision seemed to be three days leave for bereavement of immediate family. This does not deal with pets or bereavement due to the death of close friends, funerals of colleagues, divorce or mourning for the victim of a violent crime. This left the area in the mire of the individual manager's discretion or sick leave, both of which leave the underlying issue undealt with. Support in the form of flexible work practices or counselling was seen as unusual. The anecdotal evidence was that difficulties experienced by a person grieving often ended up being dealt with as a performance issue in the event their work was affected. Good workers in stressful situations run the risk of becoming victims of poor company policy.
- Individual responses: people shared the difficulty in responding to the grief of others and handling the response of others. While grieving, most wanted to talk about the deceased and relive memories, colleagues often found this difficult and did not know how to deal with the tears, choosing to avoid the subject. There are other times where a person grieving wants their space and to ensure that the other is not just engaging in a prurient interest. The connection also needed to be genuine. Well intended comments such as: 'I know how you feel', or 'At least he is not suffering anymore' were recounted as common and unhelpful.

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Helpful hints

The group in its discussions, and the facilitators in their summary, came up with a number of useful suggestions both to deal with a person experiencing grief and to change the culture of the way organisations deal with grief.

Understanding grief

The key is to understand that grief is a human process. People are different and so is their reaction to grief: there is no right or wrong way to grieve and so judgment should be reserved. Similarly, the length of the grief journey varies between people. Some experts say a year; others say two or three. However, a person whose life has been radically changed by grief will be likely to incorporate some aspect of grief into their lives.

General guidelines

- Listening was identified as the single most important strategy: being prepared to hear the person's pain, even if it is out of your own comfort zone.
- Be supportive and, if you are not comfortable on a one on one basis, send a card, letter or email expressing your sympathy.
- Do not ignore the situation. Be sensitive if the person grieving needs to talk and give them permission to do so.
- Be aware of your own comfort levels with loss.
- Be prepared for tears from time to time — they are natural.
- Do not try to make people feel better by relating worse experiences you may have gone through or trying to equate your own loss with his or hers.
- Try to avoid proselytising about your own religious beliefs or giving advice as to how the person should live his or her life.

Practical tips for companies

What was identified was the need to have a clear set of guidelines for managers, staff and union representatives to create a culture of compassion which at the same time balances the needs of the employee with those of the company. This can include: ➢

- notification to management and staff members of a co-worker's loss so that they can express their sympathy and support and be aware of the possible need to be aware of deadlines and other pressures;
- if appropriate, in the case of a death, having a representative of the company at the funeral or send flowers;
- negotiating a flexible work schedule to accommodate any ups and downs the person may be experiencing — this could include offering more work (within reason) if the person's personal style is to prefer keeping busy;
- encouraging the use of appropriate counselling facilities, either emotional or financial, if the person needs to re-organise their affairs;
- offering more than the standard three day bereavement leave, such as annual leave or leave without pay — there should be a flexible practice allowing a company representative to attend the funeral or assist if this is required; and
- having literature available in the workplace so co-workers have a resource to enable them to understand how to assist themselves and support fellow employees.

The discussion and presentation to elicit this information focused on bereavement. It was recognised that responses need to be tailored depending on the cause of grief and the person concerned.

What was generally acknowledged was the value of appropriate mechanisms within the workplace for dealing with a person who is grieving. From a human perspective, it provides the opportunity to support another at a time of need. From a business perspective, an environment of support engenders loyalty and trust. With the baby boom generation entering retirement phase in the US, the death of their co-workers or parents is likely to be an issue that confronts every workplace.

Having dealt with the issue and challenges of grief, participants look forward to a further workshop dealing in depth with practical strategies, training and implementation. ●

Shirli Kirschner is director of Resolve Advisers, Dispute Resolution Consultants, Sydney, and can be contacted at 02 9380 6466.

➢ continued from page 84

evidence in this case and so the trial proceeded without his participation.)

Stulberg J 'Mediation, democracy and cyberspace' *Ohio State Journal on Dispute Resolution* Spring 2000 at 619-42. Article discusses a chatroom type meeting involving certain community groups (such as parents and teachers, or health officials and law enforcement officials) where each 'group' can present arguments for their case and post information on the internet for others to examine. The groups then respond to the other's responses and ask for clarification. This can continue until a common consensus emerges, upon which, policy and practices will flow. ●

Georgina Dornan is a law student at Bond University researching online dispute resolution applications.

Endnotes

1. www.ebay.com (last visited 27/01/2001).
2. www.up4sale.com (last visited 27/01/2001).
3. http://www.law.ab.umd.edu/ (last visited 27/01/2001).
4. Above note 3 at n 12.

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