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What to say when an employee has a death in the family

Sam walked up, teary-eyed and with a look of distress across his face. My mind flashed to every possibility. I knew it wasn't good... but I had no idea what it could be. As we sat down with one another, alone in the conference room, he looked down, took a deep breath, and in a shaking voice said, "I just found out my brother died." Would you know what to say if that happened to one of your team members? It's the last thing in the world you want to happen to anyone, but the reality is that sometimes tragedy falls on those closest to us. And when it's one of your own employees, it's important to know how to respond and support them. A manager recently emailed us asking for advice on how to handle a similar situation, so it inspired us to go ask some long-time leaders for advice. Below are responses from leaders on supporting team members going through bereavement at work, and how they navigated those challenges. We also heard from a manager who experienced loss first-hand and shares their advice for supporting those who are grieving. Bereavement at work: What to do if your team member loses a loved one Your first response is one of the most important moments after finding out about a team member's loss. You might not know exactly what to say, but if you know how to respond well, it will speak volumes and mean a lot to the impacted team member. How to Respond When You First Find Out Author and speaker Mark Crowley says the best thing you can do after learning that a team member has lost a loved one is to call and offer your support. "It's tempting to believe employees don't want to be "bothered" by their boss in their time of grief and mourning...But in moments of deep loss, human beings need to feel supported and cared for by the people closest to them." If you're a leader that cares, or as Mark likes to say, Leads from the Heart, your words will matter quite a bit to your team member. You may even be the first person in the company they tell. Mark's advice continues: "Telling someone directly that you are profoundly sorry for their loss, and that you empathize with all the pain they are feeling goes right to their hearts." This kind of thoughtfulness makes a big impact and shows your team member know that you're there for them. Tell them about your company's bereavement policy After that initial call or meeting, if you haven't already, check what your company's bereavement policy is and any local laws. This takes the burden off of them figuring it out, so they know how many days they're allowed to take off, as well as other important details. According to the US Department of Labor, there is no national law requiring any paid leave, but there is unpaid time off permitted under the Family Medical Leave Act and to attend funerals. This means their options will really vary state to state and company to company. Once you know what your company's policy officially is, let your team member know you found the information while you were looking into ways you could help. Best of all, this can potentially get HR or another leader involved to help and show support as well. Especially at smaller companies, you can expect others will want to help and express condolences, too. Regardless of how much time they take, realize you will need to give them time to get back on their feet. While no amount of time can completely heal the pain caused by a tragic loss, time off and lightening their burden of work can make a big difference. What to do while they've gone on bereavement While your grieving team member is away, it's important to have a game plan, especially if it could be an extended leave. The smaller your team, the less you can afford to be without a single team member, so it's important to know how to balance being empathetic with making sure the work gets done. Crowley says he's often seen selfish managers respond to an employee's loss from the perspective of what they're losing— seeing their goals and deadlines slip through their fingers due to the loss of a team member. These managers will say tone-deaf things like: I know you've suffered a great loss, but do you have any sense on when you might be back at work? Crowley understands how this can happen, but does not excuse it: "You might gasp at this, but workplace pressures seem so great at times that many of us lose sight of what behavior is most appropriate, and we end up thinking more about ourselves than our employee." The reality is, all of us will be impacted by the loss of a loved one at different points in our lives. It's important to be as empathetic as possible while thinking about the best way to move forward. So what do you do? Here's what Crowley recommends: "When a member of your team suffers a great loss, the leader's job is to circle the wagons, bring the team together and divvy up the employee's workload until they return. Even in times of great loss, most people tend to feel guilty about being away. So what they need in the moment is to hear their boss say, 'Please don't worry about work. We've got you covered.'" Crowley says that managers often fail to recognize how critical a moment it is for their reputation as a leader: "It's in these critical moments when people decide if you're a boss worth striving for- or even working for." Make sure your response says, "We're here for you." Plan for while they're gone, and their return Being empathetic is important, but it's equally important to not overlook the importance of having a game plan for how you're going to cover the team member's workload while they're gone. Crowley shared with us a story of a previous manager of his whose five-year-old died suddenly. When she took a two-month leave, her team meeting up and took on the job of managing themselves. However, over time, he could see that the pressure was taking a toll. Without a proper manager to lead the team, the absence caused a block that affected the team. Making matters worse, when she returned, there were new problems and challenges. "It quickly became clear she was not sufficiently healed. She would come to work, but close her door. Or she would leave after only a few hours." Ultimately, after much patience, things didn't work out. Crowley says that if it happened again, he'd still offer the person the same compassion and support as before. However, he'd have had a better plan for her and the team: "I will always regret not realizing that I had a business to run... and that when she went out on extended bereavement leave, I could have found a new manager to lead her team." By finding a replacement to fill the space the grieving manager left, it would have been a win-win: the manager would be given the time they need while the pressure on your end for them to come back is removed. Then, when they do return, he could have found a role that better fit what she was ready for, without the pressure of her full team right off the bat. Speaker & consultant, Mark C. Crowley is the author of Lead From The Heart, Transformational Leadership For The 21st Century. Connect with him via his website at www.markccrowley.com. A few things might build up on their desk while they're gone... What to do when they get back Now that your team member is back in the office, it's important not to make assumptions, whether that's assuming everything is back to normal or that they want to take it slow. Everyone deals with grief differently, and often the most difficult part about coming back to work isn't the work itself, but the response from their boss and co-workers. You need to feel out how they're doing and see how they want to move forward. If you're not sure if they're up for moving forward with their 1-on-1s right now, ask them. Did they say yes? They probably want to get back to work. Work allows us to keep busy and connect with others, both of which can help someone experiencing grief. Find out what they need to feel like they can catch up and feel productive. Prioritize, remove blockers, and lend a hand where you can. Did they say no, hesitate, or pause? Let them set the pace and give them time to get back into the office flow. If you're already meeting with them and you get the feeling they're not comfortable opening up, throw out the agenda and let them talk about whatever they feel like. This is where having an emotional savings account built up from consistent 1-on-1s can really help. If they already trust you, they will know you have their best interests at heart, and will be more willing to open up about how they're feeling. How to handle bereavement with a new team member What if the employee who experienced the loss is new to the team? Without any previous connection established, it can make the situation even more difficult to handle. What can you do? Leadership coach and Executive Velocity founder Beth Miller coached an executive in exactly this position. The executive did everything she could think of: attend the funeral, expressed her condolences, and even offered a donation in honor of the employee's loved one. Those were immediate and thoughtful things she could do. Unfortunately, it was after this that the difficult part began. As Miller recalls: "When the employee returned to work, she expressed her sorrow for his loss. She then followed with the question: "is there anyone that you can talk to about your loss?" This question demonstrated her concern but didn't commit her to be a grief counselor, and the answer provided her with the name of the person he felt close to in the organization. She also reminded him of the company's EAP, employee assistance program. By taking the issue head on from the start, the executive made sure that the employee got the help and support they needed. Then, over time, she kept an eye on how they were doing on their journey of moving forward. "She then became keenly aware of the employee's behaviors, looking for early warning signs that could impact his productivity such as sick days or disengagement. In this case, the employee's energy and interaction with other team members did not seem to change. She also checked in with the employee's close friend, to learn if she was missing anything about the employee's recovery from loss. During the next few months she sporadically checked in with both him and his close colleague to see how he was doing and if he needed any additional assistance. She believed that having another employee to check in on the grieving employee was critical to success. And this effort she took to support her grieving employee made a real difference. According to Miller, two years later, the employee is still with the company and has taken on more responsibilities. Speaker and leadership authority Beth Miller is the Leadership Executive Advisor and founder of Executive Velocity and Chair with Vistage. Learn more about her work at executive-velocity.com/. What to Do If the Tragedy Happens to You What if it isn't a member of your team who experiences the loss - but you? The pain of a tragic loss is unimaginable for those who haven't experienced it, so how can you deal with the grief while moving forward and leading your team? While we don't presume to know the answer for everyone, when I tweeted looking for advice on those that have dealt with this issue before, I received a DM from someone who this is very raw and real for. Here are some of their insights and advice they had, as well as from Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg, who also suffered tragedy. Open a dialogue with your team Travis Dailey, a reader of the Lighthouse blog, entrepreneur, and founder himself, was willing to open up about the recent and tragic loss of his daughter to offer his insights on what has helped him. We asked him what has helped during this difficult time as well as what advice he would give for coworkers who want to show their support but are unsure of what to do. "For me, addressing my daughter's death in my first meeting with a team member was the most helpful. In most of the meetings, I'd thank them for allowing me the time to grieve and they'd offer their condolences again." Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg talked about this very same thing before when she opened up about her experience dealing with grief after the unexpected loss of her husband. Kick the elephant out of the room When coming back to Facebook after her bereavement leave, Sandberg discovered that her co-workers were unsure of how to approach her. They wanted to help but weren't sure how or what to say. She wrote in a detailed, public Facebook post about her experience: "I realized that to restore that closeness with my colleagues that has always been so important to me, I needed to let them in... and that meant being more open and vulnerable than I ever wanted to be." She decided to open up to those she worked closely with and told them they could ask her whatever they wanted and she would answer. Many of her colleagues opened up about what had been on their mind, and how they had wanted to help but weren't sure what to do. As a result, the fear was replaced by an open dialogue and a sense of psychological safety. "One of my favorite cartoons of all time has an elephant in a room answering the phone, saying, 'It's the elephant.'... Once I addressed the elephant, we were able to kick him out of the room." Kicking out the elephant in the room is a key habit for leaders to embrace. As former Pixar co-founder Ed Catmull wrote on the value of creating an open dialogue and facing these tough questions head-on: "Candor isn't cruel. It does not destroy. On the contrary, any successful feedback system is built on empathy, on the idea that we are all in this together, that we understand your pain because we've experienced it ourselves." It takes courage to be willing to open up. In doing so, you send an important message to your team that you face your challenges boldly, together, and by valuing each other's input. Thoughts truly count for bereavement at work In addition to opening up to his team, we asked Dailey what his team has done that was most appreciated. "My company sent flowers to my house. The individualized cards that I received from team members were the most meaningful. In a world of tech, it's nice to receive a physical note from someone." Things like a personalized, physical note are a thoughtful way to thank a team member or simply show you care. It also points to something even greater: the power of connection. As Sandberg shared in her open post: "While the experience of grief is profoundly personal, the bravery of those who have shared their own experiences has helped pull me through. ...I have also learned to ask for help—and I have learned how much help I need." Solitude is an important part of the bereavement process, but it's important not to forget that your team is there and wants to help. By not just opening a dialogue, but also being willing to accept support, you can tap into a powerful source of aid and strengthen from your team in the process. What Do You Say to an Employee who has Suffered a Loss? One of the most difficult things about this type of situation, before even your response as their manager, is just how to be an empathetic human being to someone who has experienced loss. What do you say to someone who has just had one of the most important people in their life taken from them? For those who haven't experienced a similar loss, our first response- while meaning well- can be more harmful than anything without us even knowing it. "I have learned that I never really knew what to say to others in need," Sandberg says. "I tried to assure people that it would be okay, thinking that hope was the most comforting thing I could offer." Dailey echoed this, expressing that to someone experiencing grief, words of hope show a lack of empathy for what the person is going through: "You carry that weight for the rest of your life. You do not shed it by getting over it. It changes you and becomes a part of you." The last thing you want is to say the wrong thing, so be careful falling on cliches or saying something that doesn't help them. What to avoid saying A friend of Sandberg's with late-stage cancer once told her that the worst thing someone could say to him was, "It's going to be okay." However, it wasn't until her own experience that she realized what he had meant. "Real empathy is sometimes not insisting that it will be okay but acknowledging that it is not." Those who have experienced loss know that it's a pain that will never fully go away. Unfortunately, it's something that's difficult for those who haven't experienced something similar to understand, which is a big reason for this post. Sandberg says even a well-intentioned, "How are you?" can trigger strong feelings: "When I am asked 'How are you?' I stop myself from shouting, 'My husband died a month ago, how do you think I am?'" Similarly, anything that presumes the loss will go away- or tries to make it so- should be stayed away from, including: "You're going to be fine." "Time is the great healer." "They're in a better place." What if you just found out about a team member's loss- or they just got back in the office- and you want to show your support? What do you say instead? What to say instead Instead of, "How are you," Sandberg says "How are you today" is better: "When I hear, 'How are you today?' I realize the person knows that the best I can do right now is to get through each day." Alternatively, Dailey says, "It's odd but I've felt the most comforted when team members and friends say, 'I'm sorry. I don't know what to say.'" Here are a few more ideas of things you can say to express your support to a grieving employee: "We're here for you." (Show empathy without trying to change how they're feeling.) "What can we do to help you right now?" (Like Sheryl's suggestion, you focus on immediate needs) "I'd love to talk if you're up for it. It's ok either way." (Extend the offer without making them feel like they have to respond or commit to anything.) Support Your Team When They Need it Most Having a team member go through bereavement at work is a situation no manager wants to experience. Unfortunately, it's a part of life - and knowing how to handle it can make the recovery process easier for both them and the rest of your team. Keep today's advice from leaders who have helped others, and those that sadly experienced it first hand, in mind when you face this challenge. And if you've dealt with this, and have advice to share, please leave a comment so everyone can benefit. Thanks to Mark Crowley and Beth Miller for their insights. And a special thanks to Travis Dailey for being kind enough to open up about his experience so that others who have experienced loss may benefit (and so that we can support them better). You can read more from Travis at his personal site: travisdaily.com. Twitter LinkedIn Facebook Email Copy Link More

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