LEADING WITH EMPATHY



A guide to supporting grieving employees during the holidays and year-round



By Mindy Buell, columnist

The holiday season is often celebrated as a time of joy and connection. Offices are decorated, calendars fill with gatherings, and conversations turn to seasonal plans.

For many employees, these moments bring warmth and anticipation. For those who are grieving, however, the season can stir memories, emotions and reminders of someone or something deeply missed.

Whether the loss occurred recently or many years ago, grief often resurfaces during the holidays. A favorite holiday recipe, an empty chair at the dinner table or a familiar tradition can accentuate feelings of loneliness and longing.

Employers who understand grief and its impact on the workforce have an opportunity to make a meaningful difference. By creating a supportive culture and responding with compassion, workplaces can help employees navigate loss while continuing to feel valued, connected and productive.

Productivity and compassion

Productivity and compassion are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they often reinforce one another. When people feel supported through their grief, employers frequently experience stronger employee trust, deeper loyalty and a more connected workplace culture.

Grief is a natural response to loss, but it does not remain at home when employees come to work. The effects of grief can manifest in many ways that include:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Challenges with decision-making
- Reduced productivity
- Increased stress and anxiety

Grief affects each person differently, and there is no predictable timeline for how long it lasts. While the intensity of grief may change over time, the loss remains part of a person's life story.

Anniversaries, birthdays and other milestones can bring emotions to the surface long after others expect the grieving person to have moved forward. Understanding this reality can help workplaces respond with greater empathy. Setting a calendar reminder to recognize milestones of grieving employees can generate comfort and goodwill on difficult days.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. While some individuals may openly share their story of loss, others prefer to process privately. Some may appear to be functioning well, but are struggling internally.

Reach out – even if you don't know what to say

Each person's grief journey is complex and unique. Avoid assumptions about how someone "should" feel or how long grief should last.

Grief is isolating and can induce a special kind of loneliness. Often, people want to help but worry about saying the wrong thing. As a result, they say nothing at all. The perfect words do not exist to take the pain of loss away, but a simple acknowledgment of someone's experience can be impactful. Presence and compassion are a much better gift to give than advice.

Consider a more hopeful and sincere approach:

- I am here for you; you don't have to go through this alone.
- I am here to listen if you want to talk or spend time together.
- Please know how much I care.
- I don't know what to say, but I am your friend and I care about you.

Statements that should be avoided include:

- I know just how you feel.
- We are never given more than we can handle.
- Time heals all wounds.
- You're lucky you had them this long.
- At least they are no longer suffering.

Holidays vs. year-round

Workplace celebrations can be enjoyable for many employees, but they can also be challenging. An employee who declines a holiday gathering may not be disengaged but is not ready to be in a crowd. Encouraging participation without expectation gives employees the freedom to respond in ways that support their emotional needs.

Support for grieving employees should not begin and end with bereavement leave. Many individuals continue to face challenges with their loss long after others expect them to have "moved on." Business leaders can help by cultivating a culture where empathy and understanding about the loss are welcomed throughout the year.

Grief extends beyond death

While the death of a loved one is a common source of grief, employees may also grieve other significant losses, including divorce, serious illness, caregiving challenges, job changes, infertility or major life transitions. These experiences can carry emotional burdens that affect workplace performance and overall well-being.

The gift of compassion

The holidays remind us of the power of human connection. For a grieving employee, one thoughtful conversation, one supportive manager or one caring colleague can make a lasting difference.

When workplaces recognize that grief is a natural part of life and respond with compassion, they help create an environment where healing and hope can coexist.

This holiday season, and throughout the year, the greatest gift we can offer may simply be our willingness to listen, to care and to walk alongside someone grieving. Often, it is through that connection that hope begins to grow.

Mindy Buell serves as the executive director/CEO of Michael's Place, a nonprofit organization providing grief support, advocacy and education throughout northern Michigan. In her leadership role, she guides the organization's mission of helping families, individuals, schools and workplaces navigate the challenges of loss with hope and healing. To learn about Michael's Place, visit www.MyMichaelsPlace.net.