

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,
Meditations on Grief, workshop materials



The aim of this pre-conference workshop run by Jan Sunoo of Federal Mediation and Conciliation Services and Brenda Paik Sunoo, a journalist and grief recovery counselor, was to raise awareness about a subject of very little study in the workplace: supporting co-workers during times of loss.

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

When the subject was raised, it became evident that everyone in the room had a story that he/she wanted to share. Yet the dominant view was that the workplace (if not society in general) is uncomfortable or unskilled in handling grief or opening a dialogue to assist in healing.

How This Workshop Came Into Being

Brenda was working as a senior editor in a new job when her son's school phoned to say that Tommy had collapsed on the basketball court. He died. This led Brenda and her husband, Jan, on a personal journey through their own grief, including involvement with The Compassionate Friends—a non-profit organization 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 a mire of beauracracy at work, led to an 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, close friends, funerals of colleagues, divorce, or mourning for the victim of a violent crime.

This leaves grief or sick leave in the mire of an individual manager's discretion. Support in the form of flexible work practices and counseling was seen as unusual. The anecdotal evidence is that difficulties experienced by a person grieving often end 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 policy.

Individual responses: People share the difficulty of responding to others' grief and of handling others' responses. While in situations involving a death most employees want to talk about the deceased and relive memories, colleagues often find this difficult and do not know how to deal with the tears. There are other times where a grieving person wants some space and needs to ensure that another is not acting out of purient interest. The connection also needs 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.

Helpful Hints

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

Understanding Grief

The key is to understand grief as a human process. People are different and so are their reactions to grief: there is no right or wrong way to grieve. 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 permanently incorporate some aspect of grief into their lives.

General Guidelines

- Listening is the single most important strategy; be 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 e-mail expressing your sympathy.
- Do not ignore the situation. Be sensitive if the person grieving needs to talk and give him/her 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 by trying to equate your own loss with theirs.
- Try to avoid proselytizing about your own religious beliefs or giving advice as to how the person should live his or her life.

Practical Tips For Companies

There is a 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 and those of the company. These can include:

- Notify 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 for help with deadlines and other pressures.
- If appropriate, in the case of a death, have a representative of the company at the funeral or send flowers.
- Negotiate a flexible work schedule to accommodate any ups and downs the person may be experiencing. This may mean offering more work (within reason), if the person's personal style is to prefer keeping busy.
- Encourage the use of appropriate counseling facilities: either emotional or financial if the person needs to reorganize his/her affairs.
- Offer more than the standard three day bereavement leave—perhaps annual leave or leave without pay. Have a flexible practice to allow a company representative to attend the funeral or assist if this is required.

- Have literature available in the workplace so co-workers have a resource to enable them to understand how to assist themselves and support fellow employees.

Of course, responses to grief need to be tailored to the cause of grief and the person concerned. An e-mail may be inappropriate in the case of a divorce, for example.

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

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



Shirli Kirschner

Shirli Kirschner is a lawyer by training. Since 1996 she has been a full-time ADR practitioner with Resolve Advisors Pty. Ltd. based in Sydney, Australia. Resolve specialises in interest-based conflict management processes.