

What to do when an employee dies

By Nick Patch | June 8, 2017 | Management & HR



A death in the workplace can feel like a death in the family. The difference is that very few businesses can afford time to mourn.

In the aftermath of a workplace loss, your team will need support and a path forward. The sad reality is you won't have much time to move from tragedy to strategy. And now more than ever, your employees will rely on you to handle the situation correctly and with sensitivity.

"It says a lot about an organization how they treat an employee who dies," said Alan Kearns, career coach and

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are going to pay attention to that and be aware of what it means.”

If a member of your team dies, here’s how to move forward.

1. **Talk to the family**

The very first step is to gather information from the employee’s family on what happened and what they feel comfortable sharing. Although those family members have every right to ask that certain details – cause of death, for instance – remain private, it’s important to convey that the organization does have an obligation to its employees to relay the message in some fashion.

2. **Communicate quickly**

Once you have approval from the family, it’s wise to move quickly on internal communication. An unexplained absence will set office gossips to chattering, and those whispers can quickly take on a life of their own. Don’t let an employee’s death become water cooler fodder.

“You want to get ahead of it,” Kearns said. “You don’t want it to become a rumour.”

Think about external communication if the person who died was a public figure or a high-ranking executive whose

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"There's some obligation to calm the employees or shareholders down and say: 'This is our plan, this is what we're going to do,'" said Cissy Pau, principal consultant at [Clear HR Consulting](#).

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3. **Communicate carefully**

Although there's merit to getting your message out quickly, that doesn't mean haphazardly. "It's something that has to be handled so well because it can go sideways so quickly," Pau said. "You have to be so tactful and so sensitive for the employees, the family, and from a PR perspective."

One potential pitfall? Saying too much.

"I've seen it where employers have given way too much information," said Lisa Kay, president and lead consultant at [Peak Performance Human Resources Corp](#). "It's upsetting and disrespectful to the family."

4. **Be consistent**

Obviously an employee death isn't something you would hope to deal with frequently. But when employees pass, be sure to treat each death with a similar amount of gravity, whether the dearly departed was a beloved company loyalist or a relatively unknown office wallflower.



and communication and a memorial for one person who's passed, you want to make sure that's your process for that type of situation happening again."

5. Offer support

Make sure your staff is aware of the Employee Assistance Program. Consider bringing in grief counsellors onsite. And for an employee who is severely shaken up, the most valuable thing you can give is time.

"If it's somebody they're really close to who died, an employee might need some time off to come to terms with it," Pau said.

6. Temporary measures

Your company needs to keep moving amid the grief. Depending on the role your deceased employee played, you might not have the luxury of time when it comes to finding a replacement. When McDonald's Corp. Chief Executive Jim Cantalupo died suddenly of a heart attack in 2004, the fast food giant waited less than six hours before announcing his replacement.

While it's unlikely you'll need to fill the vacancy quite that quickly, temporary employment agencies can provide short-term solutions even up to the executive level, with agencies like [Cerius Executives](#) and [Ogders Interim](#)



employees.

“How would the manager of that employee handle the process of sourcing a replacement?” Pau said. “Sometimes, they might not be able to handle it right away.”

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