

Bereavement in the workplace

Sensible and sensitive approaches can ease the way through the grieving process, whether the death is that of a relative or colleague, writes **Gareth Naughton**

Dealing with the death of a loved one is extremely difficult and with most of us spending half our waking life at work, employers have a responsibility to play their part in helping the bereaved deal with their loss.

According to the Central Statistics Office, about 30,000 people die every year in Ireland. It is a fact that nobody is going to get through their working life without being affected by the passing of a loved one, or even a colleague. Despite death's inevitability, nobody really wants to think about it and, in many cases, Irish employers are failing to put adequate policies and procedures in place to help grieving staff members return to the workplace.

Awareness

The key to ensuring a smooth transition is for managers and colleagues to be aware that the grieving process is normal but it is also a marathon, according to Breffni McGuinness, bereavement services and training development manager with the Irish Hospice Foundation.

"In Ireland we tend to do the time around the death quite well. There is an awareness about supporting people at that time and that is good. It can also be helpful when people can understand that grieving is a marathon rather than a sprint.

"Time-wise, we are looking at a minimum of two years to come to terms with a major loss. That does not mean that the person cannot work for two years.

"In fact we would probably encourage people to return to work provided that the workplace is supportive of their grief. What we mean there is that the workplace does not shut down people's grief or shove it under the carpet," he said.

Online resource

The Irish Hospice Foundation runs training work-

shops and offers support to employers, dealing with bereavement, and recently launched the online resource griefatwork.ie

The organisation has helped companies put together bereavement policies and has worked with employees who have suffered a loss.

McGuinness said that what helps a lot of people is normalising what they are going through and understanding that grief is a process which individuals work along at their own pace.

"What we would be trying to encourage workplaces to do is to know that this is normal, expect this, support the person in it and allow them to have off days or what we would call 'grief bursts'," he said.

"That is basically where you might feel like you are coping fine and then something just sets you off and you feel like you are back in the middle of the loss again. It is a difficult process, it is not a sickness, it is not an illness and it is not something that needs to be fixed," he said.

Realism

What really helps people is simply knowing that the support is there, if they need it.

Letting people know that they can talk about their loss if they want goes a long way to making them feel more comfortable in the workplace.

This is all that most people will need.

McGuinness cites cases where people have been told that they should feel free to step out of the office as and when they need to and that was sufficient to get them through tougher days.

There are others who will need to share their story with someone who has been through something similar and a small minority who experience "complicated grief" where they simply aren't coping with the loss.

This minority – which McGuinness estimates to be around 10 to 15 per cent of people – may need the intervention of a counsellor to help them come to terms with their loss.

"When the employee re-



It helps employees to know that help is there if they need it

Picture: Thinkstock

turns to work," said Paul Campbell, psychotherapist with Acorn Counselling and Psychotherapy, "they may be overwhelmed with feelings ranging from vulnerability, anger, sadness, guilt and shock.

"They may be fearful of how they are going to cope. The employer may note this by the employee's ability to concentrate, poor decision making, low productivity, withdrawal and absenteeism".

The employer can help by asking what he or she can do to support them and not overload them with advice, he said.

"Be realistic and flexible around working hours and help the employee to ease back. Be present, be available, give them your attention and above all listen to what is being said no matter how busy you are

"Check in regularly to see how they are doing, offering compassion and empathy. Do not avoid them. Be prepared for different emotions such as anger and emotional outbursts, don't take it personally. Offer what services are available, like counselling."

Colleagues

The impact that the death of a colleague can have on an or-



Dr Melrose Kirrane



Research suggests that there is a lot of hidden grief in organisations and it is buried behind stress, substance abuse and obesity



Breffni McGuinness, Irish Hospice Foundation

ganisation should not be underestimated either, according to Peter Ledden, psychotherapist and managing director of Abate Counselling and EAP Ltd.

"We spend more time in work than we do often with our own families. You develop friendships and for some it fulfils the role of family and it is very important that people there are able to respond when there is a loss," he said.

"It can bring up all kinds of dynamics. There is transference there where you see someone as a father figure or see an apprentice coming in as your son and then they suddenly die.

"Loss is not just about bereavement either, even retirement or accidents in the workplace are significant.

People need to be able to support people when they are going through a major life transition such as a loss.

"Not every situation requires counselling, it requires common sense and communication."

Managers play an important role in this, said Ledden, because their position within an organisation comes into play.

"They often bring a lot more comfort because they are seen as an authority figure within the organisation," he said.

"It is hard enough to get back into the workplace when dealing with bereavement, but a few kind words or an acknowledgement from someone in more authority can make that passage back into the workplace a little bit easier."

It is also worth noting that just because it doesn't seem someone should be directly impacted by a colleague's death, doesn't mean they aren't. You don't know really know what their relationship is to the person who died.

"That means cutting each other a little bit of slack," said McGuinness, "but also acknowledging that some people might be upset at different times in different ways about their colleague who has died".

Compassion

Companies should recognise the importance of support from co-workers and immediate supervisors and demonstrate that through a compassionate culture enshrined in policies and procedures, said Dr Melrona Kirrane, lecturer in organisation psychology at Dublin City University.

"It is about being supportive and compassionate in a way that makes the grieving employee feel less strain and more involved in work. Everybody will go through those phases of grief differently," said Kirrane.

"If managers know about those phases of grief, what it does inform them as to what to expect and that the person is going to be distracted, probably make errors of judgment and may be ratty, but that is all part of the grieving process and is not to be taken personally or be associated with any aspect of performance."

Failure to address bereavement in the workplace adequately can result in "disenfranchised grief", with significant consequences, both for the person grieving and the wider company, she said.

"Often what you find is that people are silent when they

come back to work or they don't get enough support and they are expected to catch up and keep going," said Kirrane.

"The show has to go on. One of the problems is that this is what can be called disenfranchised grief, and that results in the grief work being incomplete.

"A lot of research suggests that there is a lot of hidden grief in organisations and it is buried behind stress, substance abuse, obesity and the consequences then can result in financial loss due to loss in concentration, errors of judgment, accidents. It is really serious business."

It can also lead to survivor syndrome where employees who see a colleague being treated poorly or the absence of a departed colleague going unacknowledged almost "avenges" that through bad performance or even leaving.

"You can pay a very high price by getting things wrong and probably just because you haven't thought it through enough or there is a lack of education on, for example, the whole cycle of grief. That it goes through these phases identified in the literature and that your job as a manager is to be aware of those and respond accordingly," said Kirrane.

People Problems

Relationship breakdown and the 'snake-pit' bell-curve

There are some shoots indicating a post-depression upswing, but it is not all positive, as the "snake-pit" bell-curve finds favour once again with some human resource strategists.

Bell-curve forced performance distribution was a North American invention embraced in the years when strategic human resources managers began to replace plain old HR management. This was back in the days before Enron and other big financial and corporate fraud scandals, and long before the financial bubble burst in 2007-8.

The idea was to identify the top-performing 5 or 10 per cent in a company and, more importantly, their counterparts, the bottom performing 5 or 10 per cent.

The first lot were to receive a bonus and the other shower were to be shown the door – sacking in the most efficient way possible what were euphemistically referred to as 'mishires'.

The idea of performance metrics became popular with easier-to-use software packages.

Any manager could fill in on-screen assessment forms and the chip thing inside the machine could calculate individual employees' per-

formance in relation to one another.

The practice is still used in Ireland by some larger employers influenced by US corporate parents. Microsoft, Yahoo and Google, for example, adopt a variation of the classic bell-curve assessment.

All very well until a recession comes along and it's a matter of getting people to do more with less. After years of scaring the wits out of those regarded as below the bell-curve average, organisations instead began trying to get them to be more creative and dedicated, to survive recession.

Many larger organisations soon dropped forced distribu-

tion whereby, no matter how good all employees were, it was necessary to identify 5 or 10 per cent as weak or poor performers whose jobs were on the line.

Recent studies of better-performing US companies have found that they are less likely to use this snake-pit grading system, as it can turn one employee against another.

The US Institute of Corporate Productivity found just over 5 per cent of high-performing companies used a forced ranking system in 2011, down from close to 20 per cent two years earlier. It looks as if the performance bell-curve is out of synch with productivity distribution.



Gerald Flynn

As was suspected, the "work one day from home" phenomenon has resulted in those who work remotely, or out of the office, generally receiving lower performance assessment scores.

This is despite the fact that objective studies at MIT and Sloan Business School indicate that those with flexible working agreements are, in fact, more productive. They are also less likely to secure promotions.

A Brigham Young University study found that those with some home-based hours averaged a 50-hour working week, and are also less anxious that they are neglecting home duties such as childcare.

Over a decade was spent identifying the high performers, many of whom were paid unjustified bonuses, which were exposed when the financial bubble burst six years ago. The less obvious cost was

the treatment of the under-performers, who were hounded out of their jobs, though some had the guts to take discrimination cases and won compensation after years of legal wrangling.

The big organisational price paid was the lack of development and motivation of the 80 per cent of the mid-range employees, who were disregarded as the "Mr and Ms Average", who would never get the big bonus pay-outs.

The original snake-pit model led to a regime of greed and avarice at the very top, with ordinary employees sometimes cutting corners to ensure they did not fall in the forced grading and rating

systems.

Another reason for the falling popularity of bell-curve assessment is that, as you reduce staffing levels – mainly from the left side of the curve – many of the former high performers get re-designated as average or mediocre. They become less motivated and begin to look around for more rewarding jobs.

In reality, it can become an organisational "killer curve", as some of its more enthusiastic SHRM champions have learned in recent years.

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■ The American Chamber of Commerce Ireland has appointed a new chief executive. Mark Redmond has been chief executive of the Irish Taxation Institute for ten years. Prior to that, he was a director at PricewaterhouseCoopers for four years.



■ Aidan Coughlan is Newstalk's new digital media manager. Coughlan has been head of social and content with Simply Zesty for 12 months. He was also a journalist, production editor and sub-editor with Independent Newspapers for three years.



■ Jacqueline Collopy has been appointed business development manager at Trilogy Technologies, with responsibility for developing and managing the company's public sector business in Ireland. Collopy joins from Tetra Ireland Communications, where she was government sales manager for four years.



■ Fitzpatrick Castle Hotel has recruited a new director of sales and marketing. Annette O'Neill joins from Trinity Capital Hotel, where she was sales and marketing manager for two years. She was also formerly southeast sales and marketing manager with Carlton Hotel Group for two years.