



When It Is Least Expected

by Rachel Kodanaz

For years I have been presenting and writing about grief in the workplace based mainly on my personal experiences when my husband passed away and the knowledge I have gained working in the field for 14 years. Just when you think you have an answer for every situation, something personal happens and all your experience and knowledge becomes inadequate.

Several weeks ago I walked into the office to find my co-workers huddled together with blank looks on their faces. When I inquired they said, “Have you hear about John’s son?” Well, I had not. Apparently he was a passenger in a car with three other college friends in the Northwest when a deer ran into the road. The car he was riding in hit the deer which caused the car to spin around and was then broad-sided by another vehicle. John’s son was the only one injured, and sadly, he passed away later at the hospital. John and his wife and their two surviving children flew to the Northwest to be with their son. As a family, they attended a memorial service at his college where he was a freshman and emptied his dorm of his personal belongings.

In the meantime, we all gathered for days in the office, feeling

numb, trying to put our arms around what just happened. We all shared stories of how John spoke about his son daily. We had spent the last year following the life of John’s son as a senior in high school: choosing and applying to college; the details of prom; his summer job; and how he was such a great older brother to his siblings. Then in one second it was all over. We were all so overwhelmed by the loss; we did not know how to behave and what to do next, let alone what to say.

The family planned a memorial service a few weeks later providing an opportunity for John’s sons’ high school friends to return from college and attend the service. Seven hundred people were present for a warm celebration of a life taken too soon. Several of his friends shared stories of what a remarkable person he was and how he would truly be missed. The amazing part for me was when John stood up and thanked everyone for all their love and support during this time of “unspeakable grief”. I left the service thinking about my co-workers and employees when my



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husband passed away 16 years ago. They all stood at my house staring at me, not knowing what to do or say. Now I was in their shoes and felt so helpless.

As the days turned into weeks after the accident, I have spent time reflecting on my own grief, specifically how the workplace truly does serve as a healing ground for those grieving the loss of someone special. The initial shock of the tragedy creates an environment of closeness for the co-workers as they search for support and affirmation of their personal sadness. These emotions then lead to gathering together to support the griever and their family.

A few suggestions of how co-workers can join forces to help a grieving co-worker include:

- Attending the memorial service as a group will allow co-workers to show the grieving family their support and love, while bonding with one another. This will provide a central reference point to share in the beauty of the service, to support the community, and to celebrate a loved one's life.
- Participating in a meal delivery schedule. For some co-workers, planning and cooking together provides a feeling of giving and support. Typically the coordination of the schedule is maintained by a family member, making the connection more personal.
- Planning a memorial gift as a group. This can be a donation to a charity, building a scholarship fund, planting a tree, installing a park bench or any other public or private acknowledgement to honor the loss.
- Continuing to support the family. The first couple of months following the loss individuals tend to be very supportive with calls, delivering meals, stopping by the house, etc. As time goes on, however, friends and family have a tendency to return to their own lives. This is a time when co-workers can provide support by continuing to show compassion and understanding by listening, supporting projects at work and being a true friend to the griever.
- Helping the grieving employee become successful in their responsibilities at work. Examples of such actions include: helping with their customer base, preparing a report, donating an extra vacation

day, returning phone calls, inviting them to lunch, attending a meeting for them and including them in social events. These are gestures that will help the griever ease back into their daily routine at work.

Keep in mind that supporting a grieving co-worker means to support them by listening rather than avoiding them; to not over compensate and hover, but to be available when they are down; to not judge them, but show empathy and understanding. Each co-worker grieves differently, requiring unique and compassionate support in the workplace.

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Rachel Kodanaz had 16 plus years of management experience in corporate America when she experienced the sudden death of her husband, leaving her with a two-year-old daughter. Her

loss, and experience in large corporations, led her to develop and publish material to support the workplace when dealing with a grieving employee or workgroup with emphasis in educating managers and co-workers. Rachel presents to corporations, communities, not-for-profit organizations, funeral directors and conferences. Rachel is program director for Heartlight Grief and Loss Center in Denver, facilitates monthly/weekly support groups, has published numerous articles and participated in a segment on Good Morning America. "Most people spend more of their waking hours at the workplace than they do at home, so the death of a co-worker or an employee's bereavement can profoundly affect the workplace. It is important to understand that each situation will be unique and there is no 'one-size-fits-all' rule that will cover all situations. Each column will provide ideas for the employer, manager and co-workers to help deal with grief as it enters the workplace."

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