

Grieving When You're In Charge

One of your family members or close friends has died. How do you navigate your grief at work while continuing to lead your organization?



01

Tell the team what's happened.

Whether you ask someone else or do it yourself, let your colleagues know a death has occurred. Disclose only as much as you are comfortable sharing, but be sure everyone knows you have lost someone dear to you. As awkward as it is to acknowledge a death, it's far worse to have someone ask where you went on vacation and have to explain you were burying your daughter. Interactions like that will be excruciating for you and embarrassing for your employees, who may also worry about how this unintentional gaffe will affect your opinion of them.

02

Return to work when you feel ready.

If you are able to take as much time as you need, don't rush back. It's better to take a few extra days or weeks than come back prematurely, only to find that you're not able to function. The work will get done. Members of your team will step up. The organization will survive your absence. Your employees and customers will understand your need to be away. Conversely, there's nothing wrong with returning to the office after a week or even a few days if what you need is routine and a return to normalcy. Do what's best for you.

03

Allow yourself to be less productive.

When you're grappling with grief, it takes more time, energy and effort to finish a project or complete a task. Divide deliverables into small chunks. Work in short bursts, then take a break to clear your head. Allow extra time to meet your deadlines. Assess your workload, and determine what you will and won't be able to do. Create a "stop doing" list and share it with a few colleagues to be sure you assign those tasks to others.

04

Write everything down.

Capture what you need to get done on a list or in your calendar, rather than trying to remember meeting times and deadlines the way you might have in the past. Print out emails you need to respond to. Invite your team to remind you about commitments you've made and assignments you haven't finished.

05

Offer your team guidance on how to approach you.

When and how should your colleagues express their condolences? Do you want them to bring up your loss? Ask how you're doing? Or would you prefer to focus only on work and work-related topics? If your employees see you crying, should they check on you or leave you alone?

06

Choose a point person.

Someone you trust who will give you honest, direct feedback about the ways your team may be struggling to communicate with you, what's making them uncomfortable, whether your grief is coloring your analysis of a situation or person. Someone who can advise a nosy coworker to stop asking questions, deal with a colleague's hurt feelings if grief has you acting cranky or distracted or coach your employees on the best way to share a concern or interact with you.

07

Delegate.

Initially, do this more often than you think is necessary. You may be surprised how hard it is to concentrate and remain productive after a death. You'll tire more easily and struggle to think clearly. Completing projects will take longer, and you'll need to take more breaks than you did before your loss.

08

Set up support outside of work.

You'll need ways to process your grief, and talking to the people who work for you is rarely an appropriate choice. Find a grief group. See a therapist. Talk to friends and family. Your sadness will make your employees uncomfortable, and without a safe, suitable outlet, you may find it spilling over at work.

09

Be yourself.

You don't have to pretend to be okay. And it's okay if you want to.

10

Establish boundaries, at least in the beginning.

If you work in a culture that expects you to respond 24/7, let your team know when you'll be available, when you won't and how you want to be contacted after hours. Preserve time on your calendar to work undisturbed in your office, and be sure to take time away from work on the weekends.

11

Let your team know how to work with you.

Tell them the best way(s) to communicate (e.g., text, Slack, email). Caution them that you may be quicker to get frustrated or irritated, and that they shouldn't take it personally. Forewarn them that you may take more time off or leave the office early on hard days.

12

Prioritize your health.

Sleep. Hydrate. Eat well. Go for a run or a long walk. Shut your office door and meditate or sit quietly for a few moments. Your team will be watching. They'll want to know you're taking care of yourself, especially if you don't want to discuss your grief or how you're doing at work.

13

Give yourself permission to pause.

Take a breath before responding to an unhappy employee. Go for a walk before returning a call from an angry customer. Draft the email but wait until morning to send it. Run your response by a trusted colleague to be sure you're not overreacting or misinterpreting what someone said or did.

14

Reassure your team.

Your employees will worry about the viability of the organization, the security of their jobs, what will happen if you aren't able to handle your grief. Even though you are struggling, reassure them that their jobs are safe, you will be okay in time and the organization will continue to thrive.



For more advice on navigating
grief in the workplace, visit
ontargetconsulting.net.

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