

DEATH IN THE WORKPLACE

By Barbara Moore & Dennis Williams

The death of a co-worker can be a significant event in your life and those other employees. In some situations you may need to acknowledge the fact that co-workers are a part of your extended family. You may have even spent more time with some of them than with your own family members. So deal with the grief you may feel for a deceased co-worker is much the same way that you would deal with the grief for a family member. And don't be fooled by the apparent calm around you. Other employees may kick into a survival mode as they try to deal with the changed emotional environment around them.

Here, according to most grief experts, are the major steps in grief resolution:

Accept the reality of the loss. An important person in your life has died.

Work through the pain of grief. Allow yourself to experience the various emotional aspects of grief and, in so doing, you will likely encounter shock and denial, despair and guilt, anger, depression and detachment.

Adjust your life to an environment in which the deceased is missing.

Emotionally, move on with your life. If you work through the pain, the disenchantment, the anger and the resentment, your sorrow will eventually be replaced with quiet acceptance and you can move on with optimism and even greater strength.

Volunteer to Help

You may want to volunteer to organize or serve on a committee that will help coordinate company efforts to honor the deceased. Or, if you know the deceased, you might ask if your company wants you to act as a coordinator between the family and the company. This is especially true if the company plans to conduct a special ceremony or establish an ongoing tribute in which family members might want to participate. Be aware, too, that in today's world "family" can have many definitions.

Hard Work Can Pay Off

Grief is hard work. And, because it's different for everyone, you can't approach it with traditional problem solving techniques learned in the workplace. Give grief some time and space, and be aware that your fellow employees won't necessarily experience the various emotions related to grief in the same way or in the same order or intensity.

If you find that the trauma of a co-worker's death has affected you or any co-workers to the extent that normal attempts at grief resolution are inadequate, you may want to seek and/or suggest grief related counseling for yourself or others. Grief counselors and death educators are available for individual or group counseling and are unexpected or of a violent nature. Grief counseling is also recommended if there has been a series of deaths during a short period of time.