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Experiencing the Loss of a Colleague

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INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ABSTRACTS

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Experiencing the Loss of a Colleague



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Last month's *Instructional Leadership Abstract* featured my colleague, Dr. Shawnda Navarro Floyd's discussion about responding to trauma in our educational practice. A poignant part of that conversation concerns unexpected tragedies that take the lives of colleagues at our institutions. This is a difficult topic to write about but also vital as we navigate the COVID pandemic.

I teach a business communication class, and towards the end of the term, I share *10 Things Extraordinary People Say Every Day* (Haden, 2013). I talk with each class about words they say at work. When I share the saying, "I love you," the students have a visceral, negative reaction. "You don't say that at work," they proclaim with unease. When we dive deeper, we realize there may be a certain social taboo with expressing love

at work, however, all of us care deeply for many of our colleagues. This care is never more evident as it is when tragedy strikes our college community, and we lose a coworker; the pain and remorse is real and can be intense.

As an academic administrator, I have had two occasions when a colleague passed unexpectedly, and I felt a moral obligation to be a force of strength and comfort during these difficult times. Streufert (2004) explains, "How we handle death reflects how we value people in our community." As an institution, it is important to have a caring and person-centered response to loss.

The inevitability of loss compels us to plan for the hard times when we may lose a colleague. Here are three actions you can take right now to make grief easier for your organization and you.

1. Understand Grief

We may know that there are five stages of grief (Kubler and Kessler, 2013), but can we list each one? According to Kubler & Kessler they are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Regardless of your knowledge level, it is helpful to review the literature on grief so that any actions you take will help colleagues and students move through the process.

2. Have a Team

My most compelling recommendation is to not handle this crisis alone.

Plan now to identify a team for when you and the institution experience loss (Streufert, 2004). The team can help share the many responsibilities required after someone passes. It is an important practice to share the weight of the tasks and recognize needs during a time of loss.

3. Make a List

Talk with your colleagues and develop a quick checklist (Sanford, 2018) of all of the tasks that need to be completed. The stress of loss will often limit your ability to think clearly and comprehensively about how to respond. As you formulate your check-list, consider these specific areas.

Be Present

Give the bad news in person as much as possible. It can be emotionally shielding and expedient to send an email, but terrible news deserves the most personal and warm forms of communication. If a faculty member passes during an active term, do everything possible to have an academic administrator and a counselor go to the deceased professor's classes to inform students.

Members of the college community will react differently. Some may have a strong reaction to the news; others will not seem to be fazed. These outward expressions do not necessarily indicate a person's true feelings. Professional counselors can help students cope with

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the news. Be sure all students leave with a way to get help, as the shock of the news can take time for students to process.

Take Care of Others

As Jacobsen (2001) stated, “The death of a faculty member, understandably, takes an emotional and psychological toll on an academic department.” Build into your crisis plan repeated touches with your college community. Make yourself extra-available by adding specific “office hours” or by directly reaching out to colleagues repeatedly. No one will ever complain that you expressed too much concern.

Take Care of Yourself

Just as you care for your colleagues, be sure to care for yourself. Be cognizant of your own grief process. Even though you want to meet the high demands of your position, decompress your schedule for a couple of weeks during and after the crisis. Not only does taking care of yourself keep you in top shape, it also models healthy behavior for others.

Planning a Service

Planning and hosting an event to remember the colleague can be a significant and visible signal that an institution values and supports its members (Hoffman & Goya, 2007) and provides a mechanism for grieving and closure. Be sure to be inclusive in the planning and communicate repeatedly with the late colleague’s family to ensure the event meets the wishes of all.

Classroom Continuity

The transition of a class to another faculty member after a passing can be incredibly difficult. Not only are students having to learn the style of

their new professor, they likely are still working through the grieving process. Faculty who take on these classes have a special mission to carry on the good work of their colleagues while ensuring instructional continuity (Jacobsen, 2001).

Cleaning Out the Office

One of the most difficult parts of clearing out an office of a colleague who has passed is determining what is personal and what belongs to the institution. This is a great time to remind colleagues to label their possessions. Also, give space, time, and lots of help to the family for this chore, as cleaning out an office can be an emotionally draining event.

Ultimately, tragedy remains a part of life and our response to it will be an important marker on the institution and ourselves. Take time to regard your colleagues now and prepare to honor them should the need arise

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