

How to Help Employees Recover After Losing a Co-worker



HUMAN RESOURCES

The University of Alabama at Birmingham

After an employee passes, as a manager it can be difficult to navigate next steps and support the rest of your team. More than likely, you will find yourself coping with your own grief, wondering how to communicate what occurred without oversharing, and thinking about how to cover the employee's work responsibilities. The following strategies can serve as a guide as you navigate this challenge in the workplace.

INITIAL STEPS

- Set up a meeting with department managers, department and University [communications team](#), and your [UAB HR Relations](#) partner to consult on next steps to assist the family and your colleagues.
- Work with the individual's designated family member or spokesperson to gather information on what happened. Make sure the family is comfortable with you sharing this information — or any details of the death — with co-workers.
- Compile a [collection](#) or list of resources for yourself and colleagues to manage the grief that often comes with losing a teammate.
- Identify an individual in the family to serve as a contact for you or a designated individual.

COMMUNICATION

- Make sure information regarding the deceased is accurate before sharing with other employees. If a team member contacts you before obtaining that information, it is best to say you do not know. Make sure the family is okay with you sharing the cause of death with co-workers, particularly if the death is by suicide.
- Coordinate all communications about the event through your area's [communications professional](#) and reference the emergency [communications guide](#). Work with that individual to craft messaging before any statements are made publicly.
- If this individual is involved in any UAB-related social media accounts, alert the account managers to the news so they may delegate/change passwords as appropriate.
- If possible, notify co-workers and department managers of their co-workers' passing face to face as soon as possible. If the death occurs on the weekend, reach out by telephone (if feasible) and share before misinformation is spread through word of mouth or social media. Do not forget to share information with employees who are temporarily away from the office on leave or travel.
- Notify others in the organization affected by the event after sharing with team members of the deceased. When appropriate, name the individual's successor/interim or stand-in for work purposes.
- Share funeral or memorial arrangements with everyone in the department/unit as soon as you find out.

- Work with your communications partner to ensure the individual is respectfully removed from social media, unit websites, and UAB image gallery (if possible). This person can also serve as a liaison to alerting professional organizations of which your colleague was a member, to provide a statement.

OFFICE SPACE/ACTIVITIES

- Do not clear out the person's office or workstation immediately. Connect with the family contact and offer an opportunity to collect personal items.
- If possible, wait until after the funeral or memorial service before cleaning out the space or repurposing the office. If things are cleared out or moved too quickly, team members may feel resentful.
- Work with IT to set an out of office reply on individual's email and close out inbox.
- Disable the employee's badge and computer access.

ADDITIONAL TIPS:

- Refrain from appearing aloof so employees do not view you as uncaring. It is okay for you to share how you are feeling in the appropriate setting. Acknowledge that individual responses to the death are normal and are to be expected.
- Do not forget to check in on employees who were close to the deceased employee, and offer [counseling](#) or other options for grief management. Check-ins should occur regularly over the following months, seeing as grief can linger.
- You may consider offering to arrange a memorial service or memorial fund to honor the individual. It is important that this practice remains consistent.
- In some cases, employees may express a desire to leave a certain work area or equipment unused as a way to remember someone who has passed away. Respect and fulfill this request whenever feasible.
- It is important to resume the work routine in a manner that honors the deceased. Going back to work can aid in the process of healing.
- To avoid making new employees feel like they are merely replacing someone who is no longer there, consider changing furniture around or reorganizing job responsibilities.