



TAXI/GETTY

In most workplaces, it's easy to avoid this subject, unless it forces itself onto our attention. For most people, it is not a subject that they want to dwell on. We all know that we have to die sometime, but for the moment life is for living and we have much to get on with. But then someone we work with or for, or who works for us, is bereaved or maybe diagnosed with an illness that is going to kill them sooner rather than later. Suddenly there is no escape.

A significant proportion of most people's waking hours is spent working, and work is therefore inevitably an important dimension to the journey that any of us may find ourselves on when death comes calling. In the past, however, the workplace has tended to be on the periphery of the literature concerned with dying and bereavement. My own experience of the support that I was given when working for The Metal Box Company in my 20s when my first wife died was very important to me. Subsequently, I have worked with a wide range of clients who have experienced equally significant support or the lack of it while grappling with terminal

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# Death, bereavement and the workplace

**David Charles-Edwards** reflects on the opportunity

illness and/or bereavement. Sometimes they have been treated so well and sometimes so appallingly. Either way the impact on them has been significant. All of this has encouraged me to help put these issues on to the management and trades union agendas and contribute to the undermining of any inappropriate, lingering taboos on the subject.

For some who are bereaved or indeed terminally ill, work can be a welcome distraction from its dominance away from work. They want to get on with the job, almost as if there was nothing untoward afoot. A factory manager I knew startled his boss by saying that he wanted to go on working for the time being even though he had been told his prognosis was in months rather than years. The boss had imagined that it was a 'no brainer' in that he would of course want to be supported by the company on full pay to be with his family (and he was very happily married). Then he could do what he wanted in the time that remained. Well he did just that, continuing to come to work in the place he had come to since he left school over 30 years before. It was three months later in his own time that he told his boss that he was now ready to hang up his boots.

'My Way', the Paul Anka song popularised by Frank Sinatra, is a good anthem for any of us approaching death or dealing with bereavement. The song is itself about a man nearing death, who looks back at his life:

*And now, as tears subside, I find it all so amusing...  
To think, I did all that, and may I say, not in a shy way  
Oh no, oh no not me, I did it my way.*

The person affected may well be supported by family and/or friends with outstanding sensitivity, as is often the case. However for others, home may be a lonely place, or an environment where they feel they have to give rather than receive support because the people around them are so upset and needy themselves. For others, home

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may feel unsafe because the relationships there are poor and far from supportive. Marriages, for example, do not always transform in a positive direction if one partner becomes seriously ill. So what is needed at work from colleagues and managers differs in different situations with different people. The need to become person-centred, if they are not already, becomes paramount in these circumstances.

At a time of such vulnerability, an unaware or insensitive response from people at work can be deeply alienating, and slow down the ability to work through the bereavement process, a consequence of which is to delay the ability to focus effectively on work again. So handling the situation well is important in business as well as human terms, even though the former is secondary. On the other hand, a bereaved or indeed seriously ill member of staff is often likely to reciprocate a genuine and appropriate sense of care and commitment to them as human beings, rather than being made to feel that they are only valued, even tolerated, so long as they are effective units of production. Other staff are also likely to notice what is going on and be affected by the quality of care they observe for their colleague at such a time. After all, it might be them next. If the managerial response is seen to be inadequate, the alienation of colleagues is likely to be strongly felt in a spirit of solidarity. If a manager's reputation is already bad, it can get worse unless he or she shows a side that may have been hitherto hidden.

*Rick, for example, led a close-knit group of scientists with competence and generally with confidence; but then he felt very unsettled when he heard that one of his team had died unexpectedly after a short illness. Although he knew he was quite seriously ill, he had never dreamt that it was going to end like that. It was Friday and over the weekend he became progressively more aware of his own sadness at the loss of a colleague with whom he worked closely. What kept him awake at night were the various issues and questions that came*

*into mind. In what ways should he behave as 'normal' and what differently? He felt out of his depth, his comfort zone and de-skilled: the job description did not include this scenario.*

Or did it? I recollect one manager saying to me sardonically: 'I can't talk to me people about bereavement nowadays. I have to send them to a counsellor.' Many managers are supported or sometimes undermined by all kinds of specialists, to whom they can turn for help, depending on the size and managerial culture of their organisation. The latter coupled with the attitude and personality of the managers will influence whether or how they use that support. There is a danger of specialists, including counsellors, being perceived as deskilling managers. Where line managers or team leaders have a responsibility for the output and therefore the morale and motivation of the people accountable to them, supporting staff in times of bereavement or serious illness is at the heart of their working relationship, when they can demonstrate a real commitment to them as human beings, the kind of commitment that deserves reciprocation. In larger companies the back-up for the line manager may be through any combination of HR (human resources) or personnel, trades union, counselling, occupational health or EAP (employee assistance programme). Any of these may have a role to play, but it is essentially back-up. All of those relationships with the affected person are likely to be more distant, intermittent or temporary, whereas the line manager has an essential timeline day in, day out and is also hopefully both past and future. Even if the managerial turnover is rapid, the continuity can continue through overlap or good orientation, if well managed. That is sadly a big 'if' but that is another story beyond the scope of this article.

Of the various potentially valuable, supportive roles, that of the trades union or worker representative is often underestimated today. Many a manager who has bought into the anti-union rhetoric in business in post-Thatcher Britain has felt unnecessarily vulnerable if the Damocles sword of ruthless redundancy has fallen on their neck, and there was no one there for them. Of course some companies provide great support in those circumstances through good out-placement but many do nothing. Personnel can at times be seen merely as an anti-personnel weapon of management. As a former personnel manager, I find this infuriating and unnecessary but sadly it is a reputation that they far too often deserve. In relation to death, one manager told me of the suicide of one of his engineers in the face of some very 'macho' posturing on the part of new senior management preparing their utility for privatisation.



The engineer had gone missing. His manager found him with part of his head blown off, tellingly in one of the company's unmanned outstations. His boss told him to keep it out of the papers. Personnel did nothing, and it was his full-time trades union officer who had the wit to realise the trauma and to arrange some support for him. He later told me that he believed it was the union representative who had helped keep his stress from blowing him completely off course.

**‘There is a real need to acknowledge the significance of work in the face of death and dying... every organisation needs the capacity to support its people to handle the situation well at work’**

*In the case of Rick, the help he received came though an enlightened personnel manager. She learnt what had happened on the Monday and helped Rick decide what to do and how best to handle the situation not only in his team but equally with the late scientist's partner and family. It became apparent after a few weeks that the partner was especially struggling and the personnel manager helped arrange for the partner to be offered some counselling support at the expense of the company. This exceptional gesture was valued not only by her but also by the rest of the team. Some might think of that relatively small expense as a waste of money on something that was not strictly the company's responsibility, others as 'do gooding', and yet others as imaginative and enlightened self-interest on the part of the company.*

This experience prompted the HR manager to set up a workshop on the issue for a mixture of line, occupational health and HR colleagues, and also to invite some staff representatives to join them. It is clearly one of the areas in which management and trades unions can collaborate.

This article emphasises the importance of those working directly with someone who is bereaved or

terminally ill, be it line manager, shop steward, team members or other colleagues. Often what they need most is encouragement and affirmation for what they are doing well, perhaps in very difficult circumstances, as much as help or challenging where help is asked for or needed, whether or not it is asked for! But the right balance has to be struck, and skilled help of course has an important part to play at times.

*In a major commercial organisation, Joyce managed the IT department, with about 20 staff working open plan. Greg was one of these, and his young toddler, Mary, died suddenly at 16 months. The whole department felt deeply upset. Many of them had followed Mary's progress since she was a baby and she had been in from time to time with her dad. Joyce was handling the situation well but felt out of her depth. Again the pivotal person in making things move forward was her HR manager, who suggested that she meet an external consultant experienced in the field. She agreed, with mixed feelings. In the event, it helped her to regain her confidence, as well as to fine-tune the way she was approaching the situation. She arranged for the staff to meet the consultant in small groups for an hour, so they could share how they felt and what they wanted to achieve in the way they related to Greg when he came back to work. The consultant also subsequently met Greg, both on his own and with Joyce. They established how best to support him at work, in terms of what he felt he needed from her and his colleagues, and also, just as important, what he didn't want. Thirdly some one-to-one sessions were on offer to staff individually, three of whom took up the offer. In one case, the colleague had lost a baby at a similar age, when she had been told by her GP that she was grieving 'abnormally'. She was struggling with whether her level of upset over little Mary's death was normal or not.*

There is a real need to acknowledge the significance of work in the face of death and dying. Support from home and through outside agencies, such as General Practice and Cruse, is important, but every organisation needs the capacity to support its people to handle the situation well at work and not only when the illness or death is directly connected with work. Counselling skills can have a crucial part to play in back-up, and also at times in direct support of managers, shop stewards and the staff directly affected. ■

#### Reference

1 Charles-Edwards D. Handling death and bereavement at work. Routledge; 2005.