

UP THE CREEK

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Sad Bad News: Handling the Emotion of It All

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As a supervisor of people, we often find ourselves in difficult situations related to an employee's real life problems. Most management training focuses on the policy and procedure, not the emotional aspect of helping our staff through challenging times. Although, a key role for a supervisor during difficulties like an employee's cancer diagnosis is as an information resource. In this article, we want to explore the emotional piece of dealing with an employee's bad or sad news.

When an employee receives a serious life threatening health diagnosis, as a supervisor, where do you start? What will help to prepare you for this type of supervisory challenge?

To help gain some insight I recently interviewed Brad McNaught, a certified employee assistance counselor with Sand Creek.

Where do I start if I think an employee may have a serious and/or life threatening health condition?

First and foremost, the first conversation can set the stage for the entire process. Prepare yourself emotionally so you can manage your own emotions and reactions.

Some helpful questions to ask yourself:

- How am I feeling in this moment?
- What is my relationship with this employee?
- Does this remind me of other experiences in my life?

Checking in with our own emotions helps us to identify them and move into a place of helping others. Many times we deny our own feelings which only creates more difficulty and angst within ourselves as we try to manage the relationship and situation.

After you have considered your own emotional response, start the conversation with gentle open-ended questions so the employee has the opportunity to say something or nothing. The employee has the right to privacy and there is a balance between wanting to help and probing too deeply before they are ready to share information.

Some helpful open ended questions:

- How are things going for you?
- I've noticed you don't seem yourself, how is everything going?
- I'm wanting to check in, how are you doing?

In This Newsletter

Supervising employees and leading in an organization is a tough job. This quarterly newsletter provides helpful research based articles with practical ideas to help you grow and flourish in your leadership role.

Business Quote

"No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care."

Theodore Roosevelt

Fun Fact

The human heart beats an average of 100,000 times a day and 35 million times a year.

During your lifetime, your heart will beat around 2.5 billion times.

What should I keep in mind as I talk with the employee?

The most important thing you can do for them is listen. This is also the best way to glean information without having to worry about what you can and cannot ask the person. Encourage the employee to elaborate, do not interrupt and be comfortable with some silence as they decide what to share. Do not try to interpret for the employee, just reiterate what is being said so they can clarify as needed. Don't forget a human touch, the employee is scared and likely overwhelmed with information and what the future holds. Empathy is crucial during this time.

Why do I feel so uncomfortable with this type of situation and how can I help myself feel more comfortable?

This is hard stuff and generally we try to avoid hard topics like serious illness and death. Also, you feel uncomfortable because it is uncomfortable. When we are able to recognize and identify the feelings in ourselves we can use them as a way to show our humanity. Oftentimes there are no perfect words, so to describe your own feeling of confusion or sadness can bring some shared experience to the employee. We are humans, not machines and it is important we find a way to show that to our employees in a helpful way.

Some supportive statements:

- I don't know exactly what to say, but please know we are here to help you.
- I'm sorry you are going through this...
- You may not know right this minute, but I want to help so please don't hesitate to ask...
- This seems like such a balancing act; how can I get some help with this?

There are a number of resources available to you. First, start with your Human Resources department as a resource on helpful policy and procedures in your organization. Human Resources is well suited to help guide and direct you.

In addition, your employee assistance program Sand Creek is another very helpful resource as you try to understand your own feelings and the best approach to take with each specific situation. Sand Creek counselors can provide a helpful listening ear to you as you unpack all the discomfort in dealing with emotional situations. Don't forget your collegial support. You may have management colleagues that have dealt with similar situations. Reach out to a trusted colleague to gain some helpful insight and advice as you navigate and cope through this challenge.

In addition, Sand Creek is also able to help leaders during a tragic event that has affected your staff. You've made the right phone calls, you've provided the appropriate resources, but you would like to offer further support. We can provide direct and personal support by having one of our grief responders who is trained in dealing with critical incidents come to your workplace. Our counselor can meet with a group, individuals or both. For further information on our onsite services please contact us by calling 888.243.574.

About Sand Creek Workplace Wellness

Sand Creek is a women-owned small business specializing in providing exceptional workplace wellness services to support the human spirit at work. We embrace our core values of service, hope, trust, compassion, and wisdom in each interaction, thereby upholding our mission of providing helpful solutions to improve productivity and shining a light in the darkest of moments.

Our Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is designed to offer face-to-face counseling and consulting to those that voluntarily reach out to us. We are not simply a phone counseling service or online tool type EAP. Thousands of professional counselors form a worldwide Sand Creek network available to deliver personal care and support to you in your community. Our services are administered nationally, but delivered locally.

Sand Creek supports the relationship between individual health and overall organizational health. Our Organization Assistance Program (OAP) service extends the reach into the organization and provides work teams with a systemic approach to improve the health and well-being of an organization.