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Sheri Fella: It's important to lead through loss

September 28, 2018



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IN THE WORKPLACE

Moving through loss is heavy, difficult heart work and leading through loss is the same. Grief brings with it different levels of emotional highs and lows, and each of us moves through it at a different pace. Sometimes we get stuck for longer than we'd like and sometimes we seem to move through it more quickly than we expect.

At times, we try to avoid processing the grief at all, but then we find that grief lands at our doorstep as an unexpected visitor weeks or months later. Navigating through all these unknowns while caring for ourselves and our employees is difficult work that requires thoughtful

intention for all leaders. For all humans.

One of my clients unexpectedly experienced the loss of two employees within weeks of each other. Watching this person create a space for the company's work family to process the grief has been inspiring. The thoughtful care that leaders have put into direct communications with the families, and the actions they have taken as a result of those conversations, have been true examples of love in action.

Witnessing what these leaders did, and more important, what they didn't do, was a lesson in courageous empathy. What they did do was listen—a lot. To the family members who had lost their loved ones, to their work family members who had lost a co-worker and friend, and to one another. They listened for ideas, they listened for what was needed and what would help in the moment. They carefully moved through a fragile landscape that was emerging in real time, moment to moment.

They also asked a lot of questions: How are you feeling today? What would help right now? What can we do for one another that would feel right?

What they didn't do was most powerful of all: They did *not* try to fix anything. They did *not* try to move people along to get over the sadness. They did *not* tell anyone how they should feel. They did *not* try to hide their own sadness in an effort to be strong. They did *not* make promises they couldn't keep. They did not do much of anything at first but be sad with the team and families. They sat in the space of grief until they felt they understood what to do next.

Sitting in that uncomfortable hard space is where courage comes in. For a leader to hold an all-employee meeting and let his or her tears be seen and felt along with everyone else's is about as tough as it gets in leadership. Loss is tough in all its forms. And there is no detour around it that allows you to escape it entirely.

Loss of a life is on a scale of difficulty in a league of its own. But we battle through the process of loss and grief on many levels and time frames. Loss in all its forms is a punishing teacher, but a teacher nonetheless. Not one we asked for, to be sure, but a teacher that has the potential to bring forth the best in all of us. We almost always find renewed meaning in our own lives and new purpose as a result of moving through grief.

As leaders, you cannot know about all the different losses your employees are moving through from day to day. All we really need to know as leaders is that loss is always present. If we have awareness of ourselves and our employees as people, we can create an environment that allows our teams to move through the loss process in a way that helps them feel supported.

Asking questions and listening are powerful everyday tools for leaders that can serve us and those around us well, especially in times of loss. Taking off our fixer hat and standing consistently in presence are ways to feel—not fix—your way through the unknown. Loss is tough, and we can do tough things together if we find the courage to trust that empathy will lead us through. •

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