

One of the most challenging situations a supervisor can face is dealing with the death of an employee or other significant person to the work group. On top of meeting the needs of staff and the organization at this time, the supervisor is dealing with the personal impact of the loss. This issue of *The Successful Supervisor* will look at supporting both personal and professional supervisor needs in managing this life event.

*We are interested in your feedback. Email your questions and comments to the EAP at [askeap@eapsolutions.com](mailto:askeap@eapsolutions.com)*

*I've just learned that an employee of mine has died of a heart attack. She's been with us for 8 years and was loved by the entire group. And while we all knew she had some health problems, no one expected this. The staff are in tears and I would like the EAP to come right away.*

Many supervisors will experience a sad situation like this one in their careers. Let's look at what's needed.

### The Immediate Impact of Loss

This supervisor is concerned about the level of staff sadness and pain. It's natural to want to do something right away to make everyone feel OK again.

- The fact is, however, that experiencing the feelings people are having is exactly what needs to happen first. The capacity to feel pain and loss is part of what makes us human and contributes to the caring and concern for others expressed at work.
- It takes time to absorb the reality of death, whether the deceased person is a co-worker, family member or friend. Initially the sense of shock is expressed through tears, seeking out others, feeling distracted and being at a loss about how to proceed.
- Supervisors feel torn about balancing productivity and personal needs. Lower productivity is a short-lived event as it takes several days for the shock to begin to wear off. Immediate needs must be taken care of, which both supervisors and staff know. So, focus on those needs and allow some time to let staff get reconnected to the regular routine.
- Having the EAP automatically come during this period needs to be evaluated. People don't look at how to cope during shock. That comes later. The EAP will work with the supervisor to figure out what works.

### Supervisor Role

The supervisor immediately becomes the equivalent of

“Mom” or “Dad” in a family. The staff looks to you for information, support and reassurance. Therefore, the job of the EAP is to help you respond to those needs.

- **Information:** There are three phases of information.
  - (1) What happened and when is the funeral?  
Getting as much information as possible along with clearance about what can and cannot be shared is important. Then passing on whatever you can as fast as you can is necessary.
  - (2) What to do for the family after the funeral?  
This will depend on the situation and family wishes. Creating a memory book of some kind is often useful. It helps with the grief of staff members and offers something to the family.
  - (3) What will change at work?  
Reassure staff they don't need to worry. You and your manager are addressing this. They should take care of themselves and each other.
- **Viewing and Funeral:** Paying respects is an important part of saying goodbye for many people. These rituals are natural ways for staff to move through shock and find a way to grieve. Think about how to allow the most people to attend the viewing, the funeral, or both, if on work time.
- **Concern for Employee(s):** Death can trigger emotional responses in employees related to other life events. Call the EAP immediately if you are concerned about an employee(s) to develop a plan of action.

### Supervisor Needs

The EAP is available to you from the first call until you determine that staff needs have been met. You and our EAP professionals will talk as often as needed to a) get the support *you* need, b) obtain information regarding what to say and do, c) determine if and when the EAP is needed on site, and d) discuss how to address individual needs. We're here for you during times of loss.