

Emotional Intelligence: loss and grief in the workplace

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The rise of interest in emotional intelligence has been a significant feature of human resource development in recent years. Its emphasis on the emotional dimension of organisational life has been a welcome counterbalance to decades dominated by systems theory, Taylorism¹ and other such approaches which have a tendency to play down the human dimension of the workplace.

Emotional intelligence has raised awareness of the important role that feelings play in organisations, and of the dangers of not taking emotional life seriously. It has challenged some of the very dry, 'technical' approaches to workplace issues that do not do justice to the complexities of people in organisations – approaches to human resources which place their emphasis on 'resources' rather than on 'human'.

However, despite the progress made, it is important to recognise that emotional intelligence remains an underdeveloped term – we are still very much at the beginning of understanding the subtleties and intricacies of how emotions influence the workplace. One particular aspect that can be seen to be in need of development is our understanding of loss and grief in the workplace. If we are serious about extending our understanding of the part emotions play (for good or ill) in shaping organisational life, then clearly it would be a mistake to omit consideration of loss and grief issues.

The terms 'loss' and 'grief' tend to be associated with death. They also tend to be associated with private, personal matters, rather than with the more public world of the workplace. However, both of these assumptions can be misleading. Let's explore each of them in a little more detail.

1. The death of somebody who is important to us can be devastating and can lead to a major grief reaction. However, it is important to recognise that other significant losses unconnected with death can also be devastating and lead to a major grief reaction. The situations I am referring to would include (but are not limited to):

- the breakdown of a relationship (for example, through divorce);
- the loss of an ability or status (through illness or disability, for example);
- the breakdown of trust (for example, by being exploited or abused);
- the loss of a sense of safety or security (through being the victim of a crime, for example);
- and/or
- losing confidence or self-esteem as a result of a failure or disappointment.

It is therefore important that we widen our mindset so that we do not restrict the consideration of loss and grief issues to matters relating to death.

2. Grief is, of course, very much a private and personal matter. However, it is also a matter for the workplace, in so far as it is not only the case that losses feature in the workplace (redundancy, reorganisations, significant change initiatives and so on), but also that losses outside of work can have a major impact on what goes on within it.

Loss and grief are therefore very significant factors in the workplace and it would be dangerously complacent to fail to plan for how we deal with them.

There are some work settings where death-related and other losses are never far away: the health service, the police and the fire service are obvious examples here, although by no means the only ones. However, there are other workplaces where grieving is also significant. For example, staff in schools, colleges and universities, are likely to encounter on a regular basis pupils or students who have experienced a loss – even though teachers or tutors may not be fully aware of what has happened or of its impact on the person concerned.

In addition, we need to recognise that loss and grief issues can apply in *any* workplace setting. No-one is immune from losses and the grief reactions they bring. It is important to be aware that there is a very real danger that grieving employees will (at certain times at least):

- be underperforming in terms of both quality and quantity of work;
- be concentrating less than fully, possibly putting themselves and/or others at serious risk;
- register higher levels of sickness absence;
- resent not having their needs met or their interests taken into consideration; and/or
- enter conflict with others as a result of unresolved (and often unacknowledged) tensions.

It is not uncommon for people to try to avoid issues relating to grief in general and death in particular – to dismiss such matters as ‘morbid’. Many people prefer to ‘look on the bright side’ and, while a positive outlook clearly has advantages, these should not be at the expense of sweeping important issues under the carpet.

To assume that loss and grief issues will not arise in your workplace can be seen as naïve. To fail to prepare for dealing as effectively as possible with such issues can be seen as dangerously naïve. What, then, can be done to prepare organisations as far as reasonably possible for responding appropriately to people’s experiences of loss and grief? This is a very big question and I certainly cannot do it justice in a short article, but I can at least identify some key issues to help you think about how best to tackle this important area of emotional intelligence:

- Does your organisation have a staff care or dignity at work policy which incorporates issues of loss and grief? If not, is there anything that can be done to try to rectify this situation?
- Does your organisation have access to an employee assistance programme (EAP)? If so, is the programme sufficiently ‘tuned in’ to loss and grief? If you do not have an EAP, are there other ways in which staff can be supported when they need help
- Is training available for staff, managers or other stakeholders to raise awareness of these issues, their importance and the potentially detrimental effects on staff and the organisation as a whole if they are not addressed?
- Do existing training programmes (supervision skills, for example) address loss and grief and their significance?

It is not my expectation that organisations should develop a wealth of expertise in loss counselling, but I would not want to go to the opposite extreme where there is considerable naïveté and complacency about loss and grief. An ‘It couldn’t happen here mentality’ could be a recipe for disaster in some circumstances.

Emotional intelligence teaches us that there is much to be gained by looking carefully at emotions in the workplace. It would be a great pity if the advances made in this respect were to be undermined by failing to take into consideration some of the most powerful and intense emotional experiences we can have – namely those involved in grieving.

References

1. Taylor, F. W. (1911). *The Principles of Scientific Management*. New York: Harper.

Further reading

Moss, B. (2003) *Working with Loss: A Training Resource Pack*, Learning Curve Publishing (www.avenueconsulting.co.uk)

Thompson, N. (ed.) (2002) *Loss and Grief*, Palgrave Macmillan (www.palgrave.com)

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