For Supervisors
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A HELPING HAND:
HOW YOU AS A SUPERVISOR CAN HELP YOUR EMPLOYEES DURING PERSONAL CHALLENGES

By Joyce Eisenbraun • The Village Business Institute

As a supervisor, your needs are often simple: to have your team members come to work every day and do their job with quality in a timely manner. You are happy to pay them for that effort. As delightful as that unstressed, uncomplicated scenario sounds, it’s not reality.

For most employees, they not only bring themselves to work every day, they bring their personal challenges as well: a family member who is ill, a relationship that is shattering, substance abuse, cranky coworkers, anxiety and financial dilemmas.

A recent article in Inc. reported that 47% of employees indicated that personal challenges sometimes affect their work performance.

If you’re looking for a way to improve productivity in your workplace, recognizing and helping employees deal with their issues may be a first step.

Why interfere? Because your employee is struggling.

You’re seeing a drop in performance, you have “heard” some things, and you see that they have changed how they respond to people at work or to your customers and clients. As their supervisor, it’s part of your job to take action. You aren’t diagnosing, but recognizing that this individual needs support and help.

How can you help your team member get back on track – and help your company at the same time? Mindy Zetlin, author and coach, suggests a few options:

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Make sure you aren’t part of the problem
• Before an employee may be willing to talk with you, they need to trust you. How’s your relationship? Would they be willing to talk to you?

• Is the company creating added stress for the employee (change in hours, duties, concerns over staffing, etc.), or is it all on the employee’s side?

It’s performance, not personal
• In other words, don’t ask about the employee’s personal life. You may sincerely want to help, but you are not a therapist. And your employee probably doesn’t want you knowing all the details of how her/his life is disintegrating.

• Focus on the specifics of the person’s work performance such as increased absenteeism or if the employee appears to have trouble concentrating. You can be cordial but firm about goals not met.

Be compassionate AND fair
• Your heart may be stirred by the issue, but know that what you do for one employee, you’ll need to be prepared to do for others.

• For example, if your company has fewer than 50 employees, it may be exempted from provisions of the Family Medical Leave Act that requires you to give time off in certain situations, but you may want to consider extending that offer.

Use your resources!
• You are not alone in the process. Call The Village EAP for suggestions on how to address some of the issues.

• When employees are struggling, you can suggest they contact The Village EAP to talk though the issue. Counselors are licensed to handle multiple issues such as financial issues, relationship problems, chemical dependency education, anger management, eating disorders, and children.

• If the employee continues to perform unacceptably, you can do a formal referral for either work performance or a violation of your drug-free workplace policies. (If the employee needs counseling or drug or alcohol services, you may have added resources provided by your medical insurance and/or disability carrier.)

As Chris Young, Rainmaker Group, noted, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life and that of those you serve.” When you have someone who is struggling to make that first day a productive day, you’ll need to take action.

The employee’s difficult situation may seem overwhelming to them. As their manager/leader, you may need to provide the rescue they need, by letting them know they are not alone, and that they need to get help. Throughout the process, just as you would prefer to be treated, you’ll want to treat your employees with respect and thoughtful compassion.
September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month. Supervisors play an important role in preventing suicide, by identifying and responding to those who are suicidal or at high risk for suicide.

As a workplace manager, it is both humane and good business to create a culture of health and safety in your workforce, including investing in the mental health of your workers. They are your most valuable asset. By protecting the mental health as well as the physical health of your workers, you will have a more productive workforce.

As a manager, you are also well positioned to notice if your employees are struggling and to take the first steps in assisting them to get help. You spend a lot of time at work and have day-to-day contact with your employees. You get to know them over time, can observe changes in their behavior, and may see them at critical points in their life.

Stigma about mental illness can keep people from sharing their situation and seeking help, especially in their workplaces. Reassure your employees that mental health problems are real and treatable. Talk about mental illnesses in the same way you talk about physical illnesses.

If you’re concerned an employee may be at risk for suicide, reach out. Ask how he or she is doing, listen without judgment, mention changes in behavior you have noticed, and say you are concerned about the person’s wellbeing. Suggest he or she talk to someone in the Human Resources department, with The Village Employee Assistance Program, or another mental health professional.

Take action if you encounter someone who is at immediate risk. Call 911 if the danger for self-harm seems imminent, and stay with that person until you get further help. Contact your EAP or HR department, or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

Signs that someone is at immediate risk include:

• Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself
• Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun
• Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live

BE PREPARED TO RESPOND TO A SUICIDE DEATH

The suicide death or attempt of an employee – even if it does not occur on the job – can have a profound emotional effect on others in the workplace. Some people may struggle with guilt and unanswered questions about what they should have done to help, and some may experience depression or suicidal thoughts themselves.

A suicide death of an employee is only one type of suicide that could affect the workplace. The suicide death of clients, vendors, or a family member of an employee can also have a profound impact.

Managers play the following critical roles in setting the tone for how the rest of the workplace will respond to a suicide:

First, managers need to approach the situation with compassion for the bereaved. Public and private communications need to reflect a respectful tone of empathy and support and offer permission for people to take care of themselves.

Second, managers need to listen carefully to the needs of various employees, as these may differ from employee to employee. Some workers who are more distant acquaintances of the decedent might be able to return to work very quickly, while others may need more time to adjust to the loss. Workers might need to vent anger, guilt, sadness, and/or other emotions; a structured group session might be helpful in increasing coping and support. Having counseling staff with coping resources

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on hand during such group sessions might be useful if future referrals need to be made to support groups and professional mental health services. Further, some workers may express their psychological reactions to the death verbally, while others might express their reactions behaviorally, as in showing excessive absenteeism or “presenteeism.”

Managers need to be attentive to all forms of communication and document when problematic for the workplace. Some accommodations may be warranted given the undue stress to members of the workplace, but usually standards of workplace behavior and accountability can be maintained while providing this level of support.

Third, managers should take the lead in applying corporate HR policies designed to help surviving family members with practical matters. This behavior will model for others that it is all right to reach out beyond the confines of the work environment to help.

Fourth, managers should recognize their unique role. On one hand, they may be impacted by the tragic loss and in need of support, while on the other hand they may be the targets of anger and blame by other employees.

Finally, managers should be sensitive to anniversaries, notable events (e.g. holiday parties, traditions the deceased always enjoyed, achieving a milestone of a project to which the deceased contributed), and other major dates that might trigger reactions from staff and during which it might be appropriate to acknowledge again the loss of that person’s presence.

Excerpted from “The Role of Managers in Preventing Suicide in the Workplace,” written by Suicide Prevention Resource Center (www.sprc.org), and “A Manager’s Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace,” written by Carson J. Spencer Foundation, American Association of Suicidology, the Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention and the Crisis Care Network, published by Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (http://actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org)

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**10 ACTION STEPS FOR DEALING WITH THE AFTERMATH OF A SUICIDE**

_These 10 steps will assist with the roles and goals of the manager as outlined in the accompanying article._

**IMMEDIATE: Acute Phase**

1. Coordinate: Contain the crisis.
2. Notify: Protect and respect the privacy rights of the deceased employee and their loved ones during death notification.
3. Communicate: Reduce the potential for contagion.
4. Support: Offer practical assistance to family.

**SHORT-TERM: Recovery Phase**

5. Link: Identify and link impacted employees to additional support resources and refer those most affected to professional mental health services.
6. Comfort: Support, comfort, and promote healthy grieving of the employees who have been impacted by the loss.
7. Restore: Restore equilibrium and optimal functioning in the workplace.
8. Lead: Build and sustain trust and confidence in organizational leadership.

**LONGER-TERM: Reconstructing Phase**

10. Sustain: Transition postvention to suicide prevention.

_From “A Manager’s Guide to Suicide Postvention in the Workplace”_