Grief and loss aren’t the first things that come to mind when we think of work. But loss is an inevitable part of life, and we feel its effects wherever we go. Considering how much of our time we spend at work and the close bonds that develop when we are working together toward the same goals, it makes sense that grief impacts our work life as well as our personal life.

When we experience loss, it’s easy to forget how grief affects us and what to expect when we encounter it. Here are some tips about grief and how it functions.

Grief is a normal, natural response to all losses in life. While understanding grief doesn’t make the pain go away, it may be helpful to know that deep, sometimes frightening reactions are not unusual. And an understanding of grief can help us be better prepared to relate to and work with those who are facing a loss.

As difficult as it may seem, we need to grieve—it is important to experience the pain and to express our emotions after a loss. When we avoid or deny the pain, we stop the healing process and leave ourselves vulnerable to physical and emotional distress. It’s important to face our own pain and to give our co-workers and employees the room they need to grieve.

Grief triggers grief. It is not unusual to have memories or flashbacks of other losses in our life when we are grieving a current loss. This doesn’t mean we haven’t worked through the other loss. Allow yourself to express and release the emotions that come up, and to honor the feelings without judgment.

Most of us have heard of the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Knowing about the stages can be helpful in normalizing an experience that doesn’t feel normal. Most of us don’t feel “like ourselves” when we are grieving. We can feel like we are not in control of our emotions, and we can be shaken by the quickly-changing and intense emotions that come up.

Remembering the typical stages of grief can help us to move through the process with less fear. However, keep in mind that these stages are not necessarily linear or chronological (“I’ve been really angry this week so I should be in bargaining mode next week.”). They are fluid; the person grieving may experience all of the stages

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Continued on page 2
Continued from front or just some of them, and they last as long as they last. Do not add additional pressure and false expectations by giving yourself a timeline to grieve. There is no statute of limitations on grief, so be in the moment and know you will feel better when you feel better. And be understanding of co-workers or employees if they seem to be struggling with a loss for a longer period of time than you think you would.

Along with the stages of grief there are also common symptoms such as sadness, guilt, anger, and fear. Physical symptoms may include muscle tension, sleep disturbances, and loss of appetite. Again, allow yourself to feel what you are feeling without judgment. There is no right or wrong way to grieve; it depends on many factors. Listen to yourself and trust what you feel compelled to do, assuming, of course, that the behavior isn’t harmful to yourself or someone else.

I remember once, when I was processing my own grief, I felt compelled to stay home, turn on soothing music, and make soup; lots of it. I didn’t want to eat it (I gave a lot away to friends and family), but it was the act of preparing something that brought me back to times when I felt nurtured and taken care of. It was an act of nurturing myself and creating a safe place to feel my vulnerability.

The bottom line is, while there are typical stages and common symptoms associated with the process, grief is unique to the person experiencing it. Honor your own process and that of your employees. Remember, too, that a person may have a different grief reaction with each loss because they are reacting to a new and different loss.

Other Self Care Tips:
Take care of yourself. Grief is hard work, so try to get sufficient sleep, eat nutritious foods, and practice stress management.

Avoid being self-critical. Don’t buy into others’ expectations of how you should grieve. Trust yourself and do what feels right for you.

Don’t isolate yourself. Use your support systems and access additional community support as needed (support groups, counseling, etc.).

Find healthy ways to express your emotions. Cry, journal, talk to people you trust, use creative outlets, engage in physical activity to work through anger, etc.

Support for Co-Workers and Employees:
Everyone is different. Keep in mind that we each have our own unique experience when grieving.

Don’t compare your grief reactions to those of your co-workers; there is no right or wrong way to grieve.

Don’t take it personally if co-workers are acting differently.

Communicate! Eliminate the stress of the unknown as much as possible. Let others know where you are when it is appropriate, “I don’t think I’ll join you for lunch today. I’m feeling really sad and just need some time to myself.”

Let’s do lunch later this week.”

Be supportive. When you see others who seem to be having a difficult day, ask rather than assume. “You seem to be having a tough time this morning, is there anything I can do to help?” Grief can feel very isolating because it is so unique to each of us. Support and encouragement can go a long way in helping us heal.

One more thing to keep in mind for those of you who are experiencing the loss of someone you care about—is that your loved one is connected to your mourning. I felt both of these things when I lost my father. As Helen Keller once said, “Those we once enjoyed and deeply loved we can never lose … for all that we love deeply becomes a part of us.”

BUILDING REALISTIC EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS: One Size Doesn’t Fit All!

By John E. Trombly, MMgt, Consulting & Training Manager

As I considered this article, childhood memories of the 1950s TV show Adventures of Superman flooded in: “It’s a bird! It’s a plane! No! It’s Superman!” The first black-and-white episode was broadcast a month before I was born, and by the time I saw the show for the first time in 1957 after we returned from being stationed in Europe, Superman had long been breaking the laws of physics and exceeding every kid’s expectations of hero-hood with each weekly installment. Now, 63 years later, wearing a Superman cape still imbues children with supernatural powers and abilities; at least until bedtime when even superheroes have to get some rest.

Sad to say, Superman isn’t real. Even so, we often demand of ourselves and of others the supernatural ability to be perfect and tireless in performing job tasks, duties, and responsibilities. “After all,” we rationalize, “That’s what ‘they’ are being paid for!”

Hrm. Really?

So, what is “realistic” when it comes to employee performance expectations? Long-gone is the notion that corporations can offer the promise of job security and clear career paths that lead to (relatively) comfortable retirement. Instead, experts argue that the relationship between the individual and the organization demands change, and that performance must be rewarded in ways that not only contribute to the success of the organization, but which also meet the needs, goals and aspirations of the individual employee. If that is the case - and I believe it is - a new kind of partnership is required. Well, maybe not so new, just not so well used.

As humans, we were created to fulfill Purpose through the work (the service to others) that we perform. We each want to connect to our Grand Purpose with passion, excitement, and joy, and to ultimately be fulfilled by it. We want to know that we matter, that we make a difference, that someone will notice when we are gone, that our life has meaning, that we lived our life on purpose. We know that each person is uniquely gifted and talented and that each person has something positive they can contribute should they so choose. Conversely, we know that we each have our own limitations, faults, and foibles as well. Intellectually, we know it is unrealistic to expect that everyone will behave the same way, complete tasks in the same way, or perform those tasks with the same level of skill. It would be different if we were robots. Robots can be programmed to perform consistently and tirelessly without prejudice, without ego, without thought. There is no internal motivational mechanism driven by a desire to be needed, noticed, affirmed, or compensated. There is no passion; only production. But, of course, people aren’t robots.

As a function of success, performance goals and behavioral expectations must be clearly articulated and shared by the direct supervisor with each individual member of the workgroup. The organization’s vision must be cast to all and core values must be modeled and lived out consistently by every leader, manager, and supervisor. At the same time, laggards must be confronted, superstars need to be rewarded, and everyone valued as individuals worthy of dignity and respect.

Hiring right in the first place is the beginning of all good things. Beyond that, to ensure that what you expect of the individual contributor is realistic and appropriate, as a supervisor you need to know each person well enough to know what they are capable of, what they like to do, what they are good at, what motivates them, and whether or not that mixes and meshes well with the goals, objectives, and values of the organization. To do that, you have to spend time with people. Have regular conversations about what is going on in their workworld; discuss what is and what is not working, and then support and guide each one to success as an individual. Allowing and even encouraging people to be individuals who bring their sum total of knowledge, talent, experience, ideas - indeed their whole self - to work, opens the door for increased employee engagement, innovative thought, and positive growth for the individual and the organization. One size doesn’t fit all. Invest the time and effort that it takes to know each of your direct reports and see what good things will happen.

HOW TO GIVE INTROVERTS GREAT CUSTOMER SERVICE, TOO

By Kathryn Berg, Trainer

Everyone has their own conceptions and misconceptions of introverts. Being an introvert doesn’t mean you’re shy, although the two traits do often come as a package deal. At their simplest level, the difference between an introvert and an extrovert is the way you feel after having been around people. Are you drained, or are you energized? Those of us who are drained and need to spend some alone time to recharge are introverts. The individuals who draw their energy from other people are extroverts. As humans, we were created to fulfill Purpose through the work (the service to others) that we perform. We each want to connect to our Grand Purpose with passion, excitement, and joy, and to ultimately be fulfilled by it. We want to know that we matter, that we make a difference, that someone will notice when we are gone, that our life has meaning, that we lived our life on purpose. We know that each person is uniquely gifted and talented and that each person has something positive they can contribute should they so choose. Conversely, we know that we each have our own limitations, faults, and foibles as well. Intellectually, we know it is unrealistic to expect that everyone will behave the same way, complete tasks in the same way, or perform those tasks with the same level of skill. It would be different if we were robots. Robots can be programmed to perform consistently and tirelessly without prejudice, without ego, without thought. There is no internal motivational mechanism driven by a desire to be needed, noticed, affirmed, or compensated. There is no passion; only production. But, of course, people aren’t robots.

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Continued from page 3

people are extroverts.

As a faithful introvert, one thing I’ve found that I struggle with is customer service. No matter where the service provider, herself, falls on the introvert-extrovert scale, typically, her style of service is geared toward the extroverted customer. They ask a lot of questions, laugh a lot, and strike up superficial conversations to, hopefully, connect with their customers and close a sale or earn a better tip.

Generally, introverts are not interested in this kind of behavior. It’s draining to take part in these high-energy interactions, and, when they aren’t necessarily meaningful ones, they seem frustrating and wasteful to someone with a limited supply of energy to put toward outside interaction. So, from a customer service standpoint, how do you build a relationship with an introvert who, for the most part, just wants to be left alone?

**Recognize the difference.** Your first job as a customer service provider is to understand your customer, but without a close or long-term relationship, introversion may be difficult to spot. Some identifiers may include bringing a book or headphones if he is alone, or letting others order or speak first if he is in a group. Introverts tend not to initiate conversations or participate in small talk, whether in person, over the phone, or in emails. If they have a choice, they will usually receive more calls, texts, or emails than they send. Being alone in a public place is, of course, a great indicator that a person may be an introvert as well.

**Keep your distance.** Once you’ve taken the time to understand the difference between introverts and extroverts, a change in your behavior should follow. Though customer service usually means just that—serving the customer—serving an introvert should be a bit different. Try to suppress your initial desire to check in on the introvert often, and when you do, try not to speak too loudly, and keep your conversation brief. A colleague taught me the Platinum Rule: treat others the way they want to be treated. This behavior goes much further than the Golden Rule because you’re taking the time to understand the other person rather than projecting your own wishes upon her.

One of my most horrifying customer service experiences took place in a restaurant when my server spent my entire meal dropping by my table to chat because, I presume, she felt bad that I was there alone. She later yelled to the food runner that my plate was meant for “that lady over there who is all by herself?” I am not embarrassed to eat on my own, but I nearly imploded as the entire restaurant turned my way following this loud declaration of my aloneness. A better option, based on the Platinum Rule, would have been for the server to drop off my food in a way that was unobtrusive to me or the other customers around me.

**Make it meaningful.** Interestingly enough, my best customer service experience lately was also in a restaurant. The difference between the meal I previously described and the one at the Duluth Grill in Duluth, MN, comes down to my excellent server and the way she made my time at the restaurant memorable in a positive way. While this server did spend time talking with me throughout the meal, she made note that I was not comfortable with small talk. Instead, she noticed when I showed interest in the Duluth Grill’s story, including its on-site garden and the rooftop beehive they used to have. She took the time to realize that I am interested in local businesses and created a meaningful interaction based on that interest. She even went so far as to let me keep my coffee mug after having told me about the local artist who created them for the restaurant.

As with any conversation, the interaction with my waitress in Duluth left me wanting some alone time to recharge. But in this instance, I was happy to do so after having a conversation that I could talk (and write) about later, rather than the lowest-common-denominator conversations we are all used to having and forgetting as soon as we exit a shop or restaurant. Now, to quote my server, I “have a fun story to tell when people see [my] mug,” and I am happy to tell it because it means something to me.

Great customer service goes beyond meeting needs and seeks to understand the customer as a person, instead of just a patron of your establishment. Taking the time to get to know and recognize your customers’ personalities will require more effort, but the relationships you create will be worth the work.