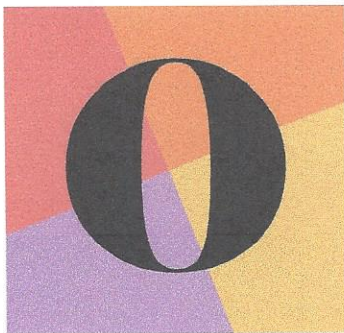




Helping Your Team *Heal*

Leaders must recognize people's grief and assist them in finding meaning.

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ONE NIGHT some time ago I was in a movie theater in Los Angeles when an earthquake struck. It was a rather long one, with several aftershocks. I remember distinctly that people in the theater seemed to fall naturally into one of three groups: Some panicked and moved chaotically, unsure what to do or where to go. Some remained calm and moved to the emergency exits, just as the preshow announcement had suggested they should. And some hardly

moved at all. Instead they implored others to calm down and go back to watching the movie.

I've been thinking about that night since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. This crisis is a shock different from an earthquake, to be sure, but it's still a shock, and I've seen friends, family members, and workers at the companies I consult with experience reactions similar to those in the theater. Some have struggled to cope. Some have done what they can with the guidance they have. And some want others to calm down and continue with business as usual.

As companies navigate a slow return to ordinary life and work routines, they must understand and acknowledge that employees will need varying kinds of support. This is not a time to check the policy manual or to robotically "copy all" with messages about thoughts and prayers. This is a time to help each individual with his or her particular grief.

Putting that name—*grief*—on it has proved to be a powerful way to help anxious colleagues make progress toward



Leaders should think about three groups of people: the *worried well*, the *affected*, and the *bereaved*.

normalcy. In late March, as the situation in the United States escalated rapidly, I was interviewed by HBR about grief and the pandemic. We addressed the collective anxiety over the loss of control, the radical change in how we were living, the anticipatory grief we felt as we imagined future job losses and possibly the death of loved ones. The interview struck a deep chord as it was shared across the world. It spurred countless notes of gratitude from doctors, nurses, other essential workers, and people from all walks of life. The reaction was a reminder that what people need first to deal with this trauma is to name what they feel so that they can start to manage it.

Grief is well understood, so we know of ways to deal with it. The five stages of grief are built on the incredible work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who died in 2004. They are adapted from her landmark work in the late 1960s on the five stages of dying: denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, and acceptance. Together she and I applied them to grief. It is imperative to recognize that these stages are not linear; they don't happen in predictable time frames; you may experience all or only some of them. They are not a map of grief but, rather, a reference guide so that when you do have one of these feelings, you can identify it and manage it.

As people go back to work, or as those who've stayed on the job through the crisis begin to interact with returning workers, many will still be grieving. Not everyone will be at the same stage at the same time. Employees, leaders, managers, and organizations need to recognize this. If people seem unusually angry, we should give them space and exercise patience. They are

grieving. Someone who questions the pandemic statistics may be in denial—and grieving.

Most important is to allow people to feel these stages. A peculiarity of modern life is that we have feelings about our feelings. We may feel sadness and then tell ourselves we shouldn't be sad—that others have suffered more. We do this with many emotions. Ultimately it doesn't work. Allowing yourself to experience the stages of grief—to let feelings move through you—is how you get to that fifth stage: acceptance. There, unsurprisingly, is where the power is. In acceptance we regain control, because we are no longer fighting the truth. This awful thing has happened. Now what?

FINDING THE RIGHT INTERVENTIONS

I've talked to many companies during this pandemic, including some very large ones. My primary message to them is: Avoid blanket policies; don't think that all employees need the same support. And recognize that we grieve other losses as well as the loss of health or life.

Leaders should think about three groups of people all working together. First are the *worried well*. They're healthy. They haven't experienced sickness around them, but they are concerned. They may still be grieving losses of work, of normalcy, of opportunities and events. Work projects they were passionate about. Weddings. Holiday gatherings. Vacations and trips. Students are losing activities that fulfill them; seniors are grieving the loss of the capstones to their academic careers: graduations, proms, and other ceremonies. Those are legitimate losses that create grief.

The worried well are also experiencing anticipatory grief—deep anxiety in which the mind imagines future losses, of all the above and more, and the effect on loved ones. Within this group are minimizers and maximizers. Minimizers cope by denying the severity of the situation or hoping deeply, nervously, for the best. Maximizers imagine the sky is falling. The truth lies somewhere between the two points of view. Work helps each group balance their minds.

Second are the *affected*, who were sick themselves or know someone who was sick but has recovered or will recover. These people haven't just imagined trauma—they've experienced it. They will benefit from accommodation and validation. Some may need counseling and other support mechanisms.

The third group holds the *bereaved*. They have lost a loved one, are grieving a death, and will be dealing directly with the five stages. Many of them will be far from acceptance.

Simply recognizing these three groups and adjusting interventions specifically for each will go a long way toward helping workers heal. Making them aware that the groups exist helps as well: They can be sensitive to different experiences. You don't want a worried well minimizer saying, "So we had to work from home for a couple of months—so what?" in a group that may include colleagues who were sick or who are grieving a death.

In the workplace much talk is about how to engage employees. When I work with companies, I tell them that if someone is grieving a loss, that is a powerful opportunity to engage them. What keeps people in jobs and dedicated is not their compensation packages or a project they worked on. It's "When my loved one died, my boss did this very thoughtful thing." Or "When I got very sick, the company supported me throughout." Or "They checked on me during a crisis." One worker I spoke with had a loved one who became ill. His boss called—not to ask when he'd be back to

work but, rather, to ask how the loved one was doing.

Companies have many grieving workers in this moment. As work returns to normal, how will they treat their employees? What did they learn? Can they turn post-traumatic stress into post-traumatic growth? (For more on this, see “Growth After Trauma,” in this issue.) Are they mistakenly “ramping back up” by asking “How can we return to the routine?” or “How can we make up for lost time and revenue?” Or will leaders invite workers into their offices and ask, “How are you doing today?” and “How can I support you?” Engagement comes from the latter.

FINDING MEANING

Like any other framework, the five stages of grief are a distillation of complex ideas. It was always challenging for Kübler-Ross—one of the 20th century’s great thinkers and the author of dozens of books that have been translated into more than 40 languages—to see her life’s work reduced to those five words. People started viewing them as “five easy steps to grief,” but she and I would tell you there’s nothing easy about them. Late in her life we talked about how acceptance had taken on a kind of finality in the grief process that neither of us had intended. Some people believed that if they reached acceptance, they were finished. We talked informally about stages beyond acceptance—hope, maybe, or finding meaning after grief. I started to write a little about what came after acceptance.

Then, in 2016, my younger son, David, died unexpectedly. I canceled everything and stayed home for weeks. It felt as brutal as I could ever have imagined. Eventually I came across the writing I had done on meaning. It didn’t take the pain away, but it did provide a cushion. I started to talk with others who’d experienced similar grief, and they echoed what I felt.

I did not want to stop at acceptance. I started to notice that people who felt stuck in grief were those who were unable to find meaning. I began to see meaning as the sixth stage of grief. I was honored when the Kübler-Ross family and foundation allowed me to add it to the grief stages. I believe that many of us will be looking for this sixth stage in the wake of the pandemic.

I’m not talking about finding meaning in a terrible event. Rather, meaning is what you find, and what you make, *after* it. That won’t make a loss seem worth the cost. It will never be worth the cost. But meaning can heal painful memories and help us keep moving forward.

Meaning comes in many forms. An effort to remember the joy that something or someone gave before the loss can bring meaning. Rituals of remembrance can bring meaning. Gratitude is a form of meaning: I’ve found myself in awe of, and thanking, workers in essential services who persevere through this crisis, many of them risking their health for low wages. Turning the loss into something positive for others can bring meaning. Meaning comes in moments and actions that heal, even if just a little.

Meaning may take time. It will be personal (only you can find your own meaning). And it doesn’t have to be profound. In my book *Finding Meaning*, I tell the story of Marcy, a woman who lost her father. One day she was buying stamps, and the man behind the desk asked what kind she wanted and showed her a bunch of designs. Marcy didn’t really care until she noticed that one set had a picture of the entertainer Danny Thomas on them. She and her father used to love to watch *The Danny Thomas Show* together. It was a favorite memory. So Marcy chose those stamps. She didn’t frame them or revere them; she used them. When she paid a bill or sent a letter, she could remember her father fondly. She had created meaning.

Recognize that your loss is not a test. When we grapple with loss, we tend to


think of it as a test of our fortitude and our ability to escape from the feelings the loss creates. But loss just happens. There’s no test—there’s just grieving. Meaning is what we make happen after.

I suspect that with the pandemic we’ll find meaning sooner than we do with many losses, because we’re all in this together over a relatively long period of time. I’ve found some meaning already. For me, writing articles like this one helps create meaning. Does it make experiencing a pandemic worth it? Absolutely not. But it is healing. That doesn’t mean we forget, or that damage didn’t occur; it means that damage no longer controls our lives. If we acknowledge that in this crisis, in our work, something meaningful happened for us and others, we are healing. We are moving forward in our grief.

I sincerely hope that for you, meaning comes soon, if it hasn’t already. I hope that work becomes a place where people find it—where coworkers support one another and where managers take care of their workers and allow them to grieve.

The pandemic is one season in our lives; it will end. It will be remembered as an extraordinarily difficult time. But the slow process of returning to a new normal—of naming our grief, helping one another reach acceptance, and finding meaning—will continue. For leaders that moment will be an opportunity. ©

HBR Reprint R2004B

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