Universiteit Leiden

Leiden University protocol for dealing with grief

General

- This protocol is intended to help supervisors and employees decide how to act in the event of the death of a colleague or someone in a colleague's immediate family, such as a partner, child or parent.
- Parts of this protocol may also be useful if an employee has suffered a traumatic experience, such as divorce or serious violence.
- The protocol prescribes that employees who have experienced significant negative events should be treated with care by their supervisors and colleagues. Depending on the way in which individual employees process their loss, this care may involve seeking relevant solutions in the workplace.
- The protocol does not attempt to establish a specific set of actions that should be taken in such a situation; rather it offers a step-by-step plan to support the affected employee or employees and to help them remain in employment.
- Managers and colleagues are advised to be proactive in their attitude towards bereaved/affected employees: seek them out and make sure they know they can discuss their loss. It is more important to listen and acknowledge their experience than to offer advice. Making the effort, even if a person uses the wrong words, will usually be better received than simply not talking about the event at all.

Terminal illness of a loved one

The grieving process can start from the moment a loved one is diagnosed with a protracted terminal illness. Employees should have the option to take annual leave, in consultation with their supervisors, to be with the sick person. In addition to the statutory options that arise from the Work and Care Act for palliative leave (caring for a terminally ill person), the collective bargaining agreement and Leiden University's Regulations for special leave also include options to take special leave or alternatives. Temporary adjustments can also be made to an employee's working hours, job role and responsibilities. The guidelines below cover how to approach a grieving colleague and how to make alternative arrangements.

1. Death of a loved one

When the organisation receives a report of the death of an employee, or a person close to an employee, the bereaved person should be contacted as soon as possible. The employee's supervisor is responsible for this, but he/she can delegate that responsibility to another person who is a better choice in the situation and who is willing to take on the role. What the contact involves will depend on the needs of the employee concerned or of the employee's loved ones, but in the first instance it should be limited to showing sympathy and briefly discussing certain practical matters:

- Would the family member or the employee like to keep in touch with a specific person within the organisation in the coming weeks?
- Which university staff members should attend the burial/cremation?
- Which colleagues and contacts in the employee's professional sphere should be informed?

The supervisor informs the department and shares the information the bereaved person has provided. Arrangements are then made to take necessary actions, such as ordering flowers, publishing an obituary and informing colleagues. Members of staff are given the opportunity to show their sympathy.
If the bereaved person indicates that he/she would appreciate it if colleagues attended the funeral, those colleagues must be given the opportunity to attend.

2. Soon after the funeral

The supervisor or designated contact gets in touch with the employee, either in person or over the phone, a few days after the funeral. This conversation should focus on whether and, if so, when the employee expects to return to work.

- The contact and the employee discuss the option of taking extra leave following the funeral;
- The supervisor lets the person know that he/she has the option of a flexible return to work, in consultation with the employer;
- The employee is asked whether he/she would like to receive telephone calls from colleagues and/or customers.

The supervisor informs colleagues of the state of affairs and encourages them to discuss appropriate behaviour towards the bereaved colleague and any initiatives intended to support him/her.
The contact and/or supervisor stays in touch with the grieving person.

3. Return to work

On the employee's first day back at work, the supervisor arranges a meeting with the employee. The following aspects may be discussed at the meeting:

- Options to make it easier for the person to return to work, such as temporary adjustments to his/her job role, working hours or duties;
- The guidance that is available to help the employee with the grieving process;
- Working with colleagues, and how those colleagues might treat the employee;
- Arrangements for periodic follow-up meetings.

The supervisor regularly asks the employee about how he/she feels about the consideration, care and support he/she has received from the organisation, and continues the conversation if the employee needs this.
If the mourning process does not progress as hoped, a third party such as the university's occupational health physician may be called in. In consultation with the employer, supervisors may be offered support or training in how to approach grieving employees and their colleagues.

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4. Etiquette

- A single contact person, such as a colleague or the employee's supervisor, may be appointed to shield a bereaved employee from excessive attention at work. He/she makes sure they stay up to date on the situation and on what the employee needs.
- Even after some time has passed, for instance six months after the event, it is important to continue to keep an eye on the person concerned. The grieving process does not follow a fixed timescale. The loss may feel even more painful after six months, and grief can still cause problems a year later.
- The people around the affected employee should bear in mind that their colleague may be suffering from psychological and physical reactions, such as loss of concentration or insomnia.
- The supervisor and/or contact should remember that the grieving process is confidential.

Determination and entry into force

This protocol was adopted by the Executive Board on 19 November 2019, having already been agreed at the Local Consultative Committee meeting of 19 September 2019.
The protocol entered into force on 31 December 2019.