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[WORKPLACE WELLBEING: DION KLEIN]

## Why home and work are inseparable

### Organisational compassion

It's unfair to expect employees to leave their personal lives at the door, but in challenging times, compassionate management can help maintain high performance

THE MEDIA today often focuses on work/life balance, but seldom addresses the importance of employers having compassion and empathy for employees when they are confronted with challenging issues stemming from their personal life. Here is the reality: we cannot and should not separate, or deny, the emotional impact our work is having on our personal life and vice versa. To say that our personal (e.g., home) life does not affect our work performance would be a lie.

Research has shown that employees believe work pressures cause a high level of conflict with their partners and negatively affect family relationships. Though management in some organisations feel they are not to blame if a relationship is in trouble because of the person's work, Dr Graeme Russell from Macquarie University disagrees (*SMH*, 6-7/9/2003). Because intimate relationships do matter to individuals, he says, they should matter to the workplace, and, for relationships to grow, couples need to spend time together.

Management must also be aware not to exclude single people when allowing special considerations that would be normally given to employees with partners or children.

Often, unfortunately, a workplace needs a tragedy to re-awaken the community spirit. Worldwide, we saw this from the tragedy of September 11 in 2001 and, locally, with the January 18 bushfires. All of a sudden, Canberra became a stronger community and workplaces began to show compassion and empathy to their employees, especially those who were directly affected by the fires. That is a very positive aspect; but it took a tragedy for organisations and the management to wake up to consider the needs of their employees. Due to the scale of the

incident, employees could not separate the emotional demands of their personal and work life because the stress level was too high.

It is not easy to separate home life and work life. As Geroski (2002) states there is "blending" of home and work that encompasses everyone's life. Geroski, an assistant professor in counselling at the University of Vermont, shared a personal story of the blending of her two realms of existence (i.e., home and work) in which the death of the family cat and how her family reacted created a good case study for her students studying to be counsellors. Geroski admits that her home life powerfully affects her work, and her work also deeply affects her life at home.

Tragedies that affect the entire company increase the organisational compassion in the workplace. When many people are affected by an incident, employers are forced to change the way they manage their workforce. Compassion and empathy have to be at the forefront in order for the organisation to function. In the case of September 11, employees lost their spouses, children, and friends. One company alone had over 700 employees perish in the disaster. The compassion must be shared not only with the survivors but extended to the families as well.

Organisational compassion, as defined by IPS Worldwide, is compassionate leadership which involves a form of public action intended to help ease people's pain and inspire others to do likewise. The actions can be small. They should not be huge publicised events. When management displays compassion, the response can directly assist in maintaining high performance in the challenging times of tragedy.

An organisation should not wait for a major catastrophe affecting the entire staff to show compassion to its employees. Individual employees may have personal trauma occur that can affect work performance and the rest of the team. For example, an employee may have a terminally ill parent or a child that has been diagnosed with a rare physiological condition that may have a huge financial impact on the household. Even what some may see as

relatively trivial — the break-up of a relationship or having a sick pet — can be a major stressor for some people.

Chapman (2002) suggests that leaders in an organisation can help employees in times of trauma by taking care of their basic needs, thereby giving people the room to make meaning of events for themselves and allowing them to focus on coping with crisis. The way an organisation deals with tragedy, illness and misfortune in the lives of *all* employees, literally defines its values as an organisation.

Individual and group trauma will continue to challenge, and sometimes shatter, people's daily lives. It is a part of life. Employers must let staff know they have a safe space to discuss current personal issues that may affect their work performance. It is unfair to expect employees to leave their personal lives "at the door".

**Dr Dion Klein** is a writer and speaker on corporate health issues and is director of Healthy Worksites, a company specialising in corporate wellness programs for the public and private sector. [drcion@bigpond.com](mailto:drcion@bigpond.com) or [www.healthyworksites.com](http://www.healthyworksites.com).

#### Resources:

- Canfield, J., Rutte, M., & Clauss, T. (2001). *Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work*.
- Chapman, K. (2002). *Leading in Times of Trauma*. <http://www.leaderscode.com>
- Geroski, A. (2001). *Learning to Blend Home and Work*. <http://www.workplaceblues.com>
- IPS Worldwide. (2003). *Traumatic Times: Leading with Compassion*. <http://www.eep.com.au>
- McMakin, J. (1993). *Working from the Heart*.

### WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES



#### Benefits of organisational compassion:

- Lessens the immediate suffering of those directly affected
  - Assists in dealing with future setbacks
  - Increases the bond between colleagues and the organisation
  - Sends the message the individual is valued as an individual, employee and team member
- Source: IPS Worldwide