

When an Employee's Crisis Becomes HR's Problem

Sometimes the line between the business world and the personal one blurs. An employee's unresolved problems can affect productivity and workplace morale.

By **Chelle E Cohen**

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What impact does an employee's divorce, household fire, or serious illness have on your company? That depends on how you, and others in your organization, handle it. An employee's unresolved personal problems can walk with him into work on a daily basis. It's important that you, as the HR manager, are able to help that emotionally rattled person get connected with the resources he needs to solve his problems.

While it would be nice if we could draw a boundary between home and work, there seems to be an increasing trend for the office and home front to merge. Companies now, more than ever before, are offering EAPs (Employee Assistance Programs) that draw and hold both new and established employees. In fact, the ability to balance work and family life is the single most important job aspect, with 97 percent of workers indicating that it is "important," and 88 percent saying that it is "extremely important," according to a recent Rutgers University national poll of 1,000 workers.

HR has a key role in communicating with the employee in crisis, directing her toward an EAP that will help smooth her problems, and guiding her efforts to return to work as a productive team member as soon as possible.

Identifying the Problem

Before you can deal with a problem, you have to know that it exists. Sometimes an employee's personal issues are brought to HR by a supervisor. Other times, the employee herself will come to your office and reveal her problems openly. In either case, in your HR role, you want to communicate to the employee that the company cares about her situation and would like to help.

"When an employee is first dealing with a crisis, we have no hope of their being effective on the job," says Don McIver, vice president of human resources for MWW Group, a public relations firm in East Rutherford, New Jersey. "My position has always been to support, to empathize with their situation, and to work collaboratively on getting them through it." While the employee describes the problem to you, be sure to listen carefully. He will likely be upset, and may not be thinking clearly. It helps to reassure him that he doesn't have to worry about his job, and that you'll do whatever you can to help.

It's important to find out what employees need from the HR department, and from the company. "Don't make assumptions about what they want or need," warns Ellen Bravo, director of 9-to-5, National Association of Working Women, based in Milwaukee. "For some people, coming into work every day is exactly what they need to keep them sane." So listen carefully and ask targeted questions, such as "What can we do to make this hard time easier for you to deal with?"

Offering Assistance

During that first crisis conference with the employee, give him copies of brochures that describe the EAPs that are available, as well as any provisions of the FMLA (Family Medical and Leave Act). Highlight the particular programs you are familiar with that might help him in his own situation. While most HR departments make a point of distributing EAP information during an employee's initial orientation and provide regular updates, it's a good idea to supply an extra copy during a crisis. Many people pay little attention to the brochures until they need them. Your ability and willingness to direct them to resources immediately may motivate them to seek help sooner.

Try to be sensitive to the employee's desire for confidentiality. Reassure him that you'll maintain whatever degree of privacy he wants. Should supervisors and coworkers, particularly those on his team, be told about it? Try to honor his wishes whenever possible.

DeAnne Rosenberg, management consultant and author of *A Manager's Guide to Hiring the Best Person for Every Job*, suggests that if the employee wants strict confidentiality, then it's best to go to her supervisor and explain that you have learned of a personal situation involving that employee, and that you'd like for her to have some flexibility. If the supervisor asks, "Well, what's the trouble?" you can say, "It's personal, and it wouldn't be right for me to divulge the information. But trust me, it's temporary. She'll soon be back to 100 percent if we give her space to work things out."

If the situation is more open, such as a death in the family, a fire, or a natural disaster, then it may help to provide grief counseling, not only for the person in pain but for coworkers as well. Don McIver tells of a situation a few years ago at a previous job, when an employee's eight-year-old child was killed in an accident. "Everyone was upset," he recalls. The company provided information about the memorial service, as well as contributions to the charity of choice. They offered counseling to the child's mother as well as on-site grief counseling to the coworkers who were emotionally affected.

Jim Dowis, director of employee relations at Tom's Foods, Inc., in Columbus, Georgia, credits his company's open-door policy with helping an employee deal with an abusive relationship that began spilling into the workplace. The woman and her husband were having marital problems. The man harassed her both at home and at work. He phoned her frequently at her desk and made threats such as, "I'm going to come down there to work and get you!"

Fortunately, this employee, who had an eight-year service history with the company, realized that it was beginning to affect both the quality of her work and the safety of other coworkers. She went initially to her supervisor asking for help. Her supervisor suggested that they speak to the HR department.

Together, the employee, her supervisor, and Dowis discussed the situation, as well as her options. The main concern was her safety, and the safety of others. Dowis explained that they needed her cooperation, because it's very important in those situations to gather information such as when the calls occurred and what specific threats were made.

Dowis immediately contacted the police and the company security personnel to make them aware of the threats. Security guards at the plant took the special precautions of checking her car frequently, walking her to and from her car, and reporting all phone contacts by her husband to the police. The employee also began receiving counseling immediately, and moved from her residence with the help of coworkers. She also placed a legal restraining

order on her husband, whom she eventually divorced. The harassment stopped within days of the security and law enforcement actions being taken.

Being Flexible

After talking with an employee about his needs in getting through a crisis, you'll often find that what he needs most is time to repair his personal life. Ellen Bravo points out that from an HR perspective, you have to ask yourself, "What would it mean to us to lose this employee altogether? What can we do to make it possible for him to stay?" Usually the answer is to be as generous as you can.

According to Bravo, "There's no magic formula to determine the right length of time and flexibility. Keep in mind that most people cannot afford to be off without pay, so good employees aren't likely to abuse time off. They're going to be back as soon as they can, not only for financial reasons but also to restore some order to their lives."

Help the employee establish how much time he needs, or what special arrangements must be made, such as a temporary reduction in workload or work hours. Give him information about his available vacation days, sick days, short-term or long-term disability, FMLA, leave of absence, and any other special options. Make it clear how much paid and unpaid time he has available through the company.

Speak with the manager or supervisor about other possible options, such as a flex schedule or telecommuting. Percrecia Eubanks at Hallmark says, "Usually the manager will try to accommodate the needs of employees who ask to take time off or [temporarily] change their hours. Perhaps they need to work a part-time reduced schedule, or they need to come in early and work late. Some even need to telecommute for a while. Most individuals can be put on an alternative schedule and still meet our business needs."

Sometimes an employee who is shattered by a personal crisis may start to doubt himself or his abilities. He may ask for a reduced workload, or sometimes even a position with less responsibility. He fails to see that his own performance won't be permanently affected, but only temporarily so.

Don McIver recalls that the woman whose child had died came to him after returning from a two-week leave of absence. She told him that she no longer wanted to be a manager, but wanted to step down into a technical support role, which was a position of less responsibility. He urged her to hold off on making a major career decision until a few months down the road. He assured her that her workload would be reduced, and some of her projects temporarily reassigned to other managers, but that she could take on the projects again when she was ready. If she was still unhappy in her position in a few months, he would then reconsider a reassignment, because he was sure they'd have another role for her within the company. He also promised to periodically check back with her and see how she felt.

Everyone in the company gave her a lot of latitude in dealing with her grief. Her sadness and despair came in waves. If she needed to come in late or leave early, she was allowed to do so. In time, and with counseling throughout the past four years, the woman has regained her love of her management position, and has excelled in it.

Getting Back to Business

Most employees are willing to help out another employee who is in crisis. When they know that a coworker is going through a tough time, most people will sympathize and try to

help out by accepting an increased workload, at least temporarily. Eventually, though, even the most generous coworkers and supervisors feel the stress of an increased workload. That's when it's time to check with the employee in crisis to see where he stands, and if he's ready to take on some of the reassigned workload.

DeAnne Rosenberg recommends that if an employee's problems persist, or the company can no longer accommodate, it's important to get the employee into action. This is the point at which you throw the ball back into the employee's court, perhaps by gently asking, "I understand you're going through a rough time right now, but what do you think you want to do about it?"

Rosenberg believes that problems sometimes linger because the employee doesn't know how to take the next step. Focusing him on what actions he can take helps him switch from the emotional side of the brain to the thinking side.

During the time of crisis and immediately thereafter, an effective HR person often acts as an intermediary, communicating between an employee in crisis and his supervisor. Particularly when an employee is gone from the office, it is helpful for the HR staff to periodically check in by phone to see how he's progressing, and when he'll be ready to return to work or to accept a heavier workload.

McIver believes that it's helpful to have a conference with management, apart from the employee, to try to understand the ongoing personal needs of the employee, and to try to balance them with the business needs of the organization. "Anytime we reach a juncture where the business needs are really suffering, we need to sit down with the employee and explain the situation. We might say, 'There are some projects that need your attention. What can you do here to help us out?'"

Of course, there are situations in which an employee is enmeshed in a personal problem so great, and so ongoing, that she can't seem to return to an acceptable attendance or performance level. In that case, you must get into a progressive discipline mode. Fortunately, however, most employees who have been given special concessions will respond well when asked by the company to pitch in and help with an increased business need.

By using your company's available EAP, and by guiding both affected employees and their supervisors through the crisis process, you'll help get that employee back to work. During and after times of crisis, many employees grow to appreciate the kindness and compassion shown to them by their company, and become more loyal employees as a result.

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