Your organization is grieving—here's how you can help

Responsive leaders need to bring the mourning process forward in their organizational culture—and in their own leadership approach.

by Aaron De Smet

Look around and you'll see grief everywhere—that stew of loss, longing, and other emotions we experience when something we value and feel connection to is gone. During the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone has suffered losses—for some, it's the loss of loved ones; for others, the loss of routines and the familiar, the missed family gatherings or coffee with friends, the canceled vacations and postponed weddings, even the loss of going into the office every day. The sources of loss, big and small, are radiating across our work and personal lives.

Harry Levinson, who, in the 1950s, applied psychoanalytic theory to the management of organizations, famously said that "all change is loss, and loss must be mourned." But organizational leaders often fail to facilitate, or even allow for, the mourning process to unfold in their own leadership approach and their organizational cultures more broadly. The pandemic brings new opportunity, and urgency, to do so. Indeed, the prolonged levels of uncertainty and disruption will only add to the grief and anxiety that employees experience. None of us knows exactly what will and won't be coming back in a postpandemic workplace, and therefore we don't yet know what is gone for now and what is gone forever.

Consider the seemingly straightforward example of working from home. This change to working arrangements has a compelling rationale, one that many employees understand and agree with. Yet more than a few of us admit privately that remote work is an emotional challenge for ourselves, for our teammates, and for our organizations as a whole. The uncertainty about when or how—and in some cases if—employees will return to office environments adds to already-intense emotions and feelings of loss: some colleagues miss the office, others the commute, still others the energy they draw from in-person interactions with customers, clients, and colleagues. These losses must be addressed and mourned.

The grieving process lets us recognize and accept our emotions, easing the path toward healing and recovery. George Bonanno, a clinical-psychology professor at Columbia University's Teachers College and the author of *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss* (Basic Books, 2009), describes grief as "natural adaptive reaction—a painful but necessary mental recalibration to accommodate a new absence."

Coming to terms with grief is something that individuals must ultimately accomplish for themselves. Nonetheless, there are tangible, practical things that you as a leader can start doing today—and things you should *stop* doing—to help your colleagues process their grief and speed recovery.

Don't perpetuate denial

The first stage of grief, denial, is immensely powerful. It's a primal source of psychological comfort, protecting people from painful emotions. But it's unhealthy and unproductive to remain there, so watch out for it. It's tempting—and natural—to want to reassure the people you lead with statements such as, "When things return to normal." Don't. We don't know if any of what people miss about "the old normal" is coming back, and expressions of denial undercut the sadness, loss, and other emotions people are experiencing. Likewise, any variations of "toughing this out" or "powering through this" can be sentiments of denial. Work life may never be the same, and the best leaders approach this fact with sensitivity and compassion.

If you are like the many leaders out there who were conditioned to think that tough times require demonstrations of strength and heroic leadership, then you should be particularly careful not to send the wrong signals now. Any declarations of reassurance, comfort, and security carry the risk of signaling to your people that countervailing emotions aren't acceptable—the exact opposite of what your team needs. Instead of glossing over the emotional challenges, seek to create psychological safety. Start by asking questions that invite and allow people to reflect on their experiences, acknowledge and recognize their feelings, and express their emotions. Dedicate time for this—and include yourself. By role modeling vulnerability and making it "OK to not be OK" all the time, you can help others connect with their emotions and get past denial.

Let people miss things

It's all too easy to assume that if your colleagues and their families are healthy right now then there's no problem. Look harder. It's a sure bet that members of your team are grieving on unacknowledged levels—the potential sources of human loss are as varied as people themselves. Enthusing to your team about how great you feel to give up commuting, for example, is a giant stop sign for the colleague who quietly grieves the loss of her train ride and the "me time" it gave her to reflect and prepare for her day. Leaders are right to want to be positive, but slow down and make sure you are making it acceptable for people to miss what they've lost.

The fastest way to shut someone down and leave them to their unresolved grief is to invalidate their emotions. ("Come on! Working from home is better! Don't you love it?")

Instead, seed the healing process by letting people yearn for the things they miss. On the next virtual meeting with your team, or the next occasion where it's appropriate, ask your colleagues, "What's one thing you miss about life before COVID-19?" The question is general enough to allow people to engage at any level without feeling uncomfortable. And they may surprise you. Resist the urge to "problem solve." This is a time to share challenges, not fix them.

One top team conducted a version of this exercise during the late stages of a big merger. They met expressly to share one thing that each executive was leaving behind that they were glad to leave, one thing they were leaving that they would miss, and one thing they wanted to carry forward and bring with them into the new organization. Leaders brought mementos, photographs, personal keepsakes, and stories and left with a reduced sense of loss and stronger bonds of trust. The executives then set aside time for this exercise for their own teams, allowing the process to be repeated throughout the organization.

Pair empathy with compassion

Commiserating with people isn't enough right now; it can even be unhelpful, as it risks merely exacerbating people's feelings of loss. Avoid (and gently discourage) "pity parties." Empathy combined with compassion, meanwhile, is very helpful. A compassionate person, by definition, is motivated to take action that reduces another's suffering, and this is emotionally beneficial to grievers. Remember, it's not the efficacy of the action that helps, but the willingness and genuine intention to help or support that is key. You cannot resolve other people's grief for them, but you can find ways to support them while *they* address it.

As you reflect on your own leadership style, you may recognize ways in which exhibiting these behaviors will be challenging for you. You may even worry that "This isn't me." Take heart. While some leaders may be innately better at this than others, these are skills like any other. Indeed, the pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for four interrelated leadership qualities: awareness, vulnerability, empathy, and compassion. Researchers have long recognized the power of these characteristics,[1] and forward-looking organizations are baking them into their skill-building and learning curricula; you can begin cultivating them in a balanced way by first looking inward to understand your own emotions, your own sources of loss and grief, and then turning outward to help support others.

As you do, look for simple ways to help your team. Watch and listen more attentively for the emotional cues your colleagues are giving you, and commit to not wasting easy opportunities to engage with them. Consider the following example. A teammate makes a disparaging, offhand joke about how draining she finds video meetings and declares she feels "zoomed out." In one scenario, you chuckle and agree. "Yes. Back-to-back video calls are the worst!" You say goodbye, click "End meeting for all," and return to your day without another thought.

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[1] For example, see University of Houston professor Brené Brown's work on the power of vulnerability in leadership: *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, New York, NY: Avery, April 2015.

You've quite possibly missed an opportunity to connect, to show support, empathy, and compassion for a colleague with unresolved emotions who has just put out a feeler. Now consider another option where your subsequent conversation naturally leads to genuine feelings of empathy (these interactions *are* emotionally depleting; I feel it too), a chance to connect and learn a bit more about what she's experiencing (how are you feeling, really?), and a compassionate offer to switch a few of the video meetings to phone calls, or shorten meetings by ten minutes to provide time to reenergize.

Your compassion won't resolve the deep, unconscious loss she may be actually feeling— for instance, the forced separation from an elderly parent that she's wrestling with—but your support can give her more space and emotional energy to recognize and accept these feelings, and then to productively resolve them herself. Q

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