



MANAGING AN EMPLOYEE WITH SUICIDAL CONCERNS

FOR MANAGERS AND TEAM LEADERS

Suicide is a significant cause of death in our society. Though there are differences in suicide rates based on such factors as age, gender, and ethnicity, a person from any background can commit suicide, or go through a period of seriously contemplating it.

People considering suicide often have been "worn down" by many stresses and problems. Actual or expected loss, especially of a romantic relationship, is often a contributing factor. The suicidal person is frequently lonely and without a solid support system. Sometimes this is a long term characteristic of the person; in other cases a geographic move, death, or a divorce may deprive an individual of personal ties that were formerly supportive.

Listen carefully to what your employees say - people thinking about suicide often give hints about their intentions:

- Talking about not being present in the future, about going away and not coming back
- Giving away prized possessions,
- Making funeral plans are examples of possible hints of suicidal intent.

If you hear such talk, question it, kindly but firmly. You won't make the situation worse by clarifying it, and an open conversation with you may be the person's first step toward getting well.

Be alert to changes in behaviour. A deterioration in job performance, personal appearance, punctuality, or other habits can be a sign of many problems, including suicidal concerns.

IF AN EMPLOYEE ADMITS THINKING ABOUT SUICIDE

You'll want to get your employee to professional help, and the way you do this is very important. The way you approach the issue can have an impact on the employee's willingness to receive professional help. Your respect and concern for the employee can contribute to the healing process.

- First offer your own personal concern and support. Let the person know you care --the employee is both a unique human being and a valued member of your team.
- Show understanding of the employee's pain and despair, but offer hope that, with appropriate help, solutions can be found for the problems that are leading the person to feel so desperate.
- Ask whether any of the employee's problems are work related, and, if so, take initiative in attacking those problems. For example, the employee may feel improperly trained for key

responsibilities, or may be having difficulties with leave or some similar issue without having made you aware of it. If you can act as an advocate in remedying some of these problems, you will help in three ways--removing one source of pain, showing concretely that someone cares, and offering hope that other problems can also be solved.

- Do not question the employee about personal problems, as the individual may wish to keep them out of the workplace, but listen with empathy if the employee chooses to share them.
- Do not offer advice, but acknowledge that the problems are real and painful.
- Protect the employee's privacy with regard to other employees. This will require thought and planning, as questions are sure to arise. When dealing with higher management, you need to think clearly about what they actually need to know, e.g., that the employee is temporarily working a reduced schedule on medical advice as opposed to what they don't need to know, e.g., intimate personal information that the employee may have confided in you as the immediate supervisor.
- Without hovering over the employee, show your continued support and interest.
- Make it clear that the individual is an important part of the team, and plays a key role in mission accomplishment.

GET HELP

As a general rule, anyone feeling enough pain to be considering suicide should be referred to a mental health professional, at least for evaluation. Make it clear that you want the employee to get the best possible help, and that some types of assistance are outside your own area of competence.

- Usually, the Employee Assistance Program (EASA) is the referral source for mental health assistance. If the employee consents, call EASA yourself, emphasising that the situation is serious and needs timely attention. You may find it helpful to get advice from them yourself if you are unsure how to handle the situation or need support with it.
- If for some reason the EASA is not immediately available, call 000 or your community's Mental health Crisis team. These are normally listed with other emergency numbers in the telephone book, and available on a 24 hour basis.

FOLLOW UP

Once your employee is involved in a treatment programme, try to stay in touch with the programme. This does not mean that you should involve yourself with specific personal problems that the employee is discussing with their GP, or therapist/counsellor. What you do need to know, however, is how you can work with the treatment programme and not at cross purposes to it.

Adapted from 'Manager's Handbook Handling Traumatic Events'