

Vitality!

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More and more people are choosing to continue working after being diagnosed with a terminal illness. Some do so to maintain a sense of normalcy while others can't afford not to work. Whatever the reason, respecting someone's last wishes without disrupting daily operations can be a delicate balancing act for managers.

Supporting employees with a terminal illness

A MANAGER IS INSTRUMENTAL IN FULFILLING A TERMINALLY ILL EMPLOYEE'S WISH TO CONTINUE WORKING. UNDERSTANDING THE ILLNESS, THE TREATMENTS AND SIDE EFFECTS, AS WELL AS ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES, WILL HELP YOU SUCCEED IN SUCH AN UNEXPECTED BUT WORTHWHILE ROLE.

Being diagnosed with a terminal illness can turn a life upside down. Everyday routines are replaced by sickness, medical appointments, treatments and uncertainty and hospitals become second homes. So it's not surprising that many people decide to regain control by leading as normal a life as possible for as long as possible—and that means continuing to work.

While this can be extremely beneficial to the individual and their loved ones, it can have a profound effect on the workplace as coworkers struggle to come to terms with the impending death of a colleague. In smaller organizations, the emotional impact can have a significant effect on productivity, customer service and morale. As a result, this can be one of the most difficult and sensitive situations

you, as a manager, will encounter. While you want to help the ill employee in any way possible, you must also support the rest of your team and continue meeting business goals—all while dealing with your own grief.

What to expect

To best support a terminally ill employee you first need to understand the employee's illness, its treatment and side effects, and the issues that may emerge over time. For example, will the employee have to deal with increasing pain, nausea or fatigue?

Fatigue is a symptom of many chronic illnesses and may be the result of condition itself or something that follows chemotherapy or other treatments.

You should expect the employee to have less strength and energy and perhaps be more irritable than usual.

You and your team should also be prepared for some of the physical changes many serious illnesses cause, such as weight loss, hair loss, changes in complexion and skin tone, scarring and loss of mobility (the eventual need for a wheelchair for example).

However, someone with a terminal illness is not only dealing with the physical impact of their condition, they're also struggling with a range of emotions that can include being:

- **shocked and confused**
- **angry or bitter**
- **sad**
- **fearful**
- **depressed**
- **uncertain and anxious**

It's important to note that no two people will cope with their diagnosis in the same way. Some will be stoic and others emotional. You need to be ready for a range of reactions.

Having a conversation

It's always uncomfortable discussing personal matters with an employee, but talking serious, and perhaps terminal health issues can perhaps be the most difficult of all. However, it's vital to meet with the individual as soon as you become aware of the diagnosis so you can discuss how to provide the best support. While a later, more formal meeting can be held with the HR manager, case manager and others, the first should be between the two of you, as this not only sets the tone for the whole journey, but respects the fact that the employee may initially be distraught and reluctant or fearful to discuss the matter.

How do you begin?

- **Find a comfortable place where you can both sit down and not be overheard. Turn off your mobile phone and ask not to be disturbed.**
- **Be ready to listen to anything—however emotional or difficult. Should emotions spill over, give the employee time to recover and let him or her know it's okay to be upset.**
- **Being a good listener is the one of the best forms of support you can provide. Show that you're listening by:**
 - being attentive and not interrupting. If the employee interrupts you, allow him to do so
 - maintaining eye contact
 - encouraging conversation by nodding, or saying things like 'I see' or 'what happened next?'

If the conversation stops, it may mean the employee is thinking about something painful or sensitive. Wait for a moment before asking what they were thinking about.

- **Don't be afraid to honestly share your own feelings. Use phrases like 'I find this difficult to talk about, but I'm here for you.'**
- **Avoid giving advice unless it's asked for. When you are asked, use phrases like, 'have you thought of trying...' rather than 'if I were you I would...'**

- **Respond to any humour (but don't initiate it). Humour can be a way of coping and putting things in perspective.**
- **Don't try to cheer the employee up. This is likely to have the reverse affect and inhibit meaningful conversation.**

Mutually agree to have regular check-ins to discuss ongoing accommodations, workloads and other issues. Use these times to informally talk about any concerns, feelings and challenges the employee may have.

Reasonable accommodations

Employers are legally expected to make reasonable accommodations for employees who qualify as disabled. But even if your situation isn't technically a disability issue, most organizations will want to make accommodations for a terminally ill employee who wishes to continue working. Review your organization's policies and guidelines regarding sickness and long-term disability and consult with your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) to find out what other supports are available to you, the employee and your team.

There are many accommodations that can be offered, including:

- **flexible working hours, such as starting late and leaving early;**
- **part-time work options (two or three days a week for example);**
- **working from home;**
- **reducing workload and/or modifying the job description by reassigning some duties;**
- **time off for doctor's appointments, treatment and the effects of treatment;**
- **moving to another work space to allow more accessibility or privacy; and/or**
- **transferring the employee to another job.**

If your employee is battling fatigue, it's a good idea to discuss ways to minimize its effects. You might want to consider re-arranging work to coincide with the times when the individual's energy levels

are higher, allowing more breaks and rest periods, or setting more realistic work deadlines.

Creating a communications plan

Ask your employee whether he wants colleagues, suppliers and clients to know about the illness. Some people will want to keep their diagnosis private until the effects of treatment or the need for time off leave no option. This is understandable if they feel their professional world is the only part of life that is, for now, 'normal'. They may also be concerned about how their colleagues will treat them.

However, most people will want to share their diagnosis and benefit from the support colleagues can provide. Disclosure and open discussion also prevents rumours and any negative reactions that could accompany unexplained accommodations.

Work with the ill employee to develop a plan to share information internally and, if applicable, externally. Let the employee decide what to disclose and what to keep confidential. Decide together whether to inform people through e-mails, team meetings or one-to-one, face-to-face briefings. The employee may want to do the communicating or may ask you to do so. If you take on this role, be honest about the potential impact on the team. Most people want to help but don't know how, so you should find your team agreeable to temporarily assuming some of the ill colleague's work load and other accommodations. With the employee's consent, explain the illness, its symptoms and treatments and thank everyone for picking up the slack and supporting each other during such an emotional time.

Supporting the team

When the diagnosis becomes known, people may become upset or begin to grieve the impending loss. They may be unsure what to say or how to help. While this is expected and natural, your first responsibility is to maintain productivity and morale as much as possible. Clearly communicate exactly what accommodations are being made to support the ill employee and ask each member of your team how they coping and if they need support dealing with their feelings. It can be

helpful to have a representative from your Employee and Family Assistance Program at team meetings to let everyone know exactly what supports are available to them.

Tell your team that your door is always open if they need to talk or take time to compose themselves and that you will make yourself as accessible as possible. Stress that this situation involves the entire team and that each person can make a difference.

Anticipate emotional reactions from team members over the next weeks. Understand that such reactions are normal and be ready to listen, validate feelings and direct people to their EFAP for further support.

Supporting yourself

Finally, dealing with such an emotionally fraught situation over several weeks or months can take both a physical and emotional toll on you. It's not easy providing strong leadership when you are also extremely sad and upset. Don't shoulder all the weight. Create a team that will support you, the ill employee and your team over the coming weeks or months. This team could include HR, case management, your EFAP, and an outside expert in the illness. Seek the support of other managers or senior executives who have dealt with a similar situation and have a confidential supporter to help you cope with your own emotions. This can be a spouse, friend or counsellor.

The last word

Managers have the capacity to turn a tragic situation into one that has positive outcomes for the affected employee, the team and the organization. Making it possible for someone with a terminal illness to remain part of the workforce for as long as possible not only helps restore his or her dignity and sense of normalcy but also helps create a caring organizational culture. Leaders are seen to be committed to the wellbeing of workers and demonstrating integrity, compassion and concern. And that goes a long way to increasing employee loyalty, engagement and morale.

About Vitality!

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