

Life Happens: How to Build Supportive Leave Programs During Times of Crisis

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As a longtime HR leader, I considered myself an expert on leave programs. I directed HR for a tech company in Austin, after all. My job was helping other employees navigate through crises in their own lives—and I prided myself in doing this work well.

Then, my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. There's nothing quite like a personal crisis to show you just how much more you have to learn. Suddenly, I found myself on the other side of the table, navigating a series of uncomfortable discussions around reduced hours, reduced pay and unpaid leave so I could care for my mom in the last 16 weeks of her life. That was back in 2016.

Today, through that difficult experience, I can say I've gained a wealth of knowledge and practical know-how about creating compassionate leave programs that truly support employees. Unfortunately, I also know that the programs at most companies fall far short of meeting their people's needs.

Why the disconnect? Employers have been slow to adapt. According to a study by Monster, employers tend to think employees have better work-life balance than their employees actually do. But change is crucial today when many people actively seek jobs that will also support their lives outside of work. According to data from the Forbes Health-Ipsos Monthly Health Tracker, 90% of those surveyed stated work-life was "an important aspect of their job." In fact, a recent Ketchum survey found the Covid-19 pandemic has caused 63% of American workers to "dramatically reevaluate their professional priorities."

How can companies create a supportive leave program?

A compassionate leave program can help tremendously with talent recruitment and retention—while a subpar leave program can be costly. Grief-related losses alone may cost U.S. companies "as much as \$75 billion annually," according to a 2017 piece from SHRM. As HR leaders, figuring out how to better support the life part of the work-life balance is vital—not only for our own health, sanity and productivity but also for the organizational bottom line.

1. Prepare for the expected—and the unexpected.

Some of the big life changes employees encounter—such as a new baby or a stressful move—are expected and can be planned for. Many others, however, often hit people without warning. A difficult medical diagnosis or the sudden loss of a loved one can change our lives irrevocably, from one moment to the next.

The pandemic of the last two years has shown us just how quickly life can change for all of us—and just how much we need empathy, understanding and flexibility from our employers to help us adapt to changing times. Make sure your organization has strong leave plans in place to help employees through both expected and unexpected challenges.

2. Craft policies with inclusive language.

Today's leave policies often contain glaring gaps. A company may offer generous maternity leave—but not allow time off for fathers and partners who may be the new child's primary caregiver. A bereavement leave policy may cover miscarriages—but neglect to offer time off for failed adoptions or unsuccessful reproductive procedures.

Review your leave policies to make sure they are truly inclusive. Parental leave should be offered to all new parents and bereavement leave available to all employees who suffer a loss.

3. Consider offering benefits beyond leave.

To attract and retain top talent today, it's critical to offer benefits a step above the norm. That's why many organizations provide their employees with additional benefits going beyond leave—ranging from fertility to caregiving to bereavement—that help people manage critical life events outside of work.

When creating your employee benefits package, make sure to include items that buttress your existing leave programs. For example, support programs and flexible work schedules can help employees through challenging changes and allow them to make a smoother transition back to work.

4. Create employee resource groups (ERGs) around life events.

Employee resource groups (ERGs) can serve a number of important functions, ranging from giving visibility to minority groups to providing a safe space for employees to discuss specific issues. So consider too how ERGs at your company might work best in conjunction with your leave programs.

An ERG for working parents, for example, could be highly beneficial for employees preparing for or returning from parental leave. Employees who have experienced bereavement can also benefit from ERGs that offer comfort, community and practical advice. This type of group support is especially valuable today when so many people are grieving the loss of loved ones due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. Build compassionate communication into manager training.

The benefits you provide your employees won't do much good if your employees don't feel they are allowed to use them. Your company culture will determine whether your employees feel comfortable taking the leave they need to return as better employees—or fear they'll be perceived as bad team players for taking time off.

To cultivate a supportive company culture, offer compassionate leadership and management training. This will equip the leaders of your organization to work empathetically with the people they manage and be flexible and caring in their roles. Compassionate training also helps leaders look for creative solutions that benefit both employees and the organization.

As human beings, we all need support from time to time. As HR leaders, it's up to us to make sure our organizations give our people the support they need to make it through life's challenges. Building a compassionate, inclusive and supportive leave program will help your company keep your top talent through both the good and the inevitable bad times.