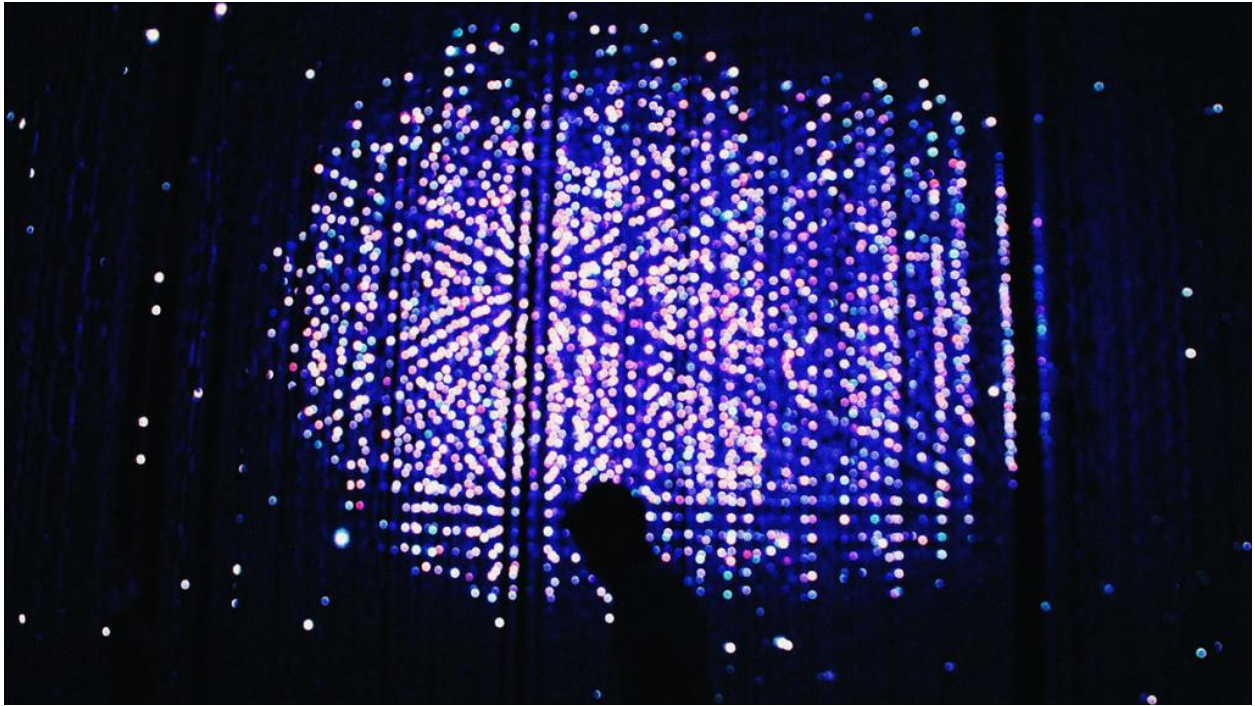


What to Do When Your Employee Is Diagnosed with Cancer

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All managers know that they need to help their employees through challenging times – whether it’s a tough work situation like a tight deadline or high-stakes client, or a demanding personal situation, like a new baby or a sick parent. But almost no manager is prepared for when one of their direct reports announces that he or she has cancer, despite the fact that more than [1.6 million people](#) will be diagnosed this year.

As an executive coach who works with top corporate leaders, I’ve closely researched how managers can respond well or poorly when faced with such a situation. It’s also a lesson I learned firsthand when I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2011. If one of your employees tells you about a diagnosis, here are four things to keep in mind.

Allow your employee to control the terms of disclosure. You may be the first colleague your employee tells about their diagnosis. If they haven’t already spoken with HR, it’s important to direct them there as soon as possible, so they know their options for health insurance, medical leave, short-term disability, and any other benefits your firm offers. Once their plan is set, it’s time to communicate the news to their colleagues. Wherever possible, it’s best to defer to the employee about how and when they’d like to communicate their

situation. Some may prefer to tell their colleagues directly, while others might find it more comfortable for you to send out a departmental memo with the news (make sure you allow them to review it first). For example, you might write, *“I am sending this email to let you know that Jen is undergoing treatment for cancer. Jen asked me to share this information with you. She will be taking an extended leave of absence commencing immediately. I will be covering her work while she is away. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns.”*

Help guide your team’s response. When your staff finds out their colleague has received a cancer diagnosis, many will want to jump into action. They might want to raise money in an effort to help or send emails to show their support. But even good intentions like these can sometimes backfire; although some employees would be touched by the heartfelt gesture, others might feel deeply uncomfortable in the spotlight. That’s why it’s important to talk with your employee about their privacy preferences. Once you understand what they want, speak to the rest of the team by letting them know that with an event such as a cancer diagnosis, everyone has a different way of reacting to the situation, and sharing what would make their colleague most comfortable.

Develop a work plan. We often think of work plans as a bureaucratic necessity. But when it comes to cancer diagnoses, developing specific plans and processes can be powerful forms of support. Given how emotional it is to receive a cancer diagnosis, many employees are understandingly too stressed to think about putting a process in place for achieving work deliverables. That’s why, as a manager, you should gently take the lead on helping them to create one. It can be useful to ask the employee to collaborate with a team member or team members on the initial draft work plan, so they can collectively identify the responsibilities that need to be transferred, and ensure the delegation doesn’t unfairly impact just one person. If they’re not in a position to write up a plan themselves, you can start a conversation and ask them questions until you’re able to piece together the necessary information. The plan should include specific expectations, deliverables, and a delegation plan. For instance, a sales manager’s plan might include identifying important milestones coming up that need to be handled, and whom they can delegate to for both the short-term (the presentation in two weeks) and the slightly longer term (managing the client relationship over the next two months). The employee might also consider alternative ways they can continue to deliver the services. For instance, before my diagnosis I normally traveled to client sites, but during my recovery I made a plan with them to use video calls instead.

Create a Plan B. Leaders should also help their employee set realistic expectations about what he or she can accomplish. For example, your employee might insist she can be just as productive during her treatment and think of this time away as a variation on “working from home.” That would be great, and maybe indeed be the case. But you should also clearly set up a Plan B just in case those good intentions don’t work out.

For instance, I expected to be out of the office six to eight weeks, but I didn’t heal as quickly as expected. My recovery actually took about 12 weeks. As a result, I had to take a step back and readjust my workload on a weekly — but sometimes daily — basis because of how I felt. In some instances, I had to cancel a call or wait to write a memo until I felt better the next day.

Your employee's Plan B should identify which commitments are essentially mandatory – they will plow through and complete them even if they are feeling awful – and which ones are OK to delay, defer or cancel. It's generally not the end of the world if they can't make a weekly team conference call, and their colleagues will understand. But if that same conference call is with a key client, and they're responsible for answering questions about an important new project expansion, their colleagues need to know they can count on them and that unless they are truly in the midst of an emergency, they will make the effort to participate.

Make the tough decisions. An employee's recovery timetable can be unpredictable. Sometimes your best laid Plan B – it's fine if the project is done in two months, rather than one — has to morph into an unwanted Plan C (we need to bring in an outside consultant to complete the project, instead). Managers may have to make the tough decisions. For instance, one company decided to wait eight weeks to begin coaching engagements with me; but another organization I worked with decided they couldn't wait for my recovery and moved on to another executive coach. It was a painful moment for me, but it was the right decision for the business and I accepted it.

The key to making the tough decisions is remembering that you have a business to run. While it may not seem fair, it's a disservice to the business and the team involved when no decision is made, because in some cases waiting too long can create bigger issues to solve.

It isn't easy when a team member receives a cancer diagnosis, and it is often hard to know how to navigate workplace responses. However, by taking the above points into account, companies will be well on their way to providing meaningful support for those who have been diagnosed – so they can return more quickly as valued colleagues.