

Helping an employee through divorce

Breakups can take financial toll on employers, emotional toll on colleagues

Divorce or the breakdown of a relationship is an extremely emotional process. People are often confused, filled with fear and unsure of how to navigate the process. Their world is turned upside down, triggering unsettling and distressful emotions. The effects of the emotional distress in the workplace can be devastating.

Close to 50 per cent of marriages in North America end in divorce. The divorce rate rises to a staggering 60 per cent and higher for subsequent divorces by these same individuals. Clearly, we need to employ strategies that will get everyone, including those caught in the middle — often the children — off the “divorce-go-round” and on to a better life. We need to encourage healthy new beginnings, even when divorce looks like an end.

On a classic rating scale of stressful life events, divorce consistently ranks number two — second only to the death of a spouse or child. People often feel overburdened and lack confidence so it’s not surprising many buckle under the pressure.

Divorce undoubtedly reduces a worker’s productivity. Research by Integrated Organizational Development in Waynesville, N.C., pegged the cost per worker going through a divorce at about \$8,300, assuming an average wage of \$19.50 per hour and a 50 per cent to 75 per cent drop in productivity. It also includes days missed as the worker takes time off to deal with the legal, financial and psychological issues related to divorce.

The research also takes into account a drop in productivity by the worker’s supervisor — as a result of time spent dealing directly and indirectly with performance and productivity issues — and a loss in productivity and increased workload by some of the



GUEST COMMENTARY

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worker’s peers.

If a critical executive is faced with separation or divorce, it can have an even more dramatic impact on the organization.

And concerns go beyond just financial ones — including the potential for workplace violence related to the breakup or child custody issues.

When employers are able to help employees through this all-too-common but difficult and potentially distracting situation, it can pay dividends for both. When workers are distracted, they make more mistakes and work more slowly. If they’re feeling depressed, their creativity will drop.

If they’re feeling angry, they may project some of that anger at co-workers and customers. Employee well-being can be affected by extra stress, depression and anxiety brought on by the financial impacts of divorce, child-care responsibilities and loneliness. This can, in turn, impact safety, morale and retention.

Furthermore, senior personnel often find themselves trying to manage department

personnel who are coping with the aftermath of divorce but are unsure as to how to counsel them.

How to handle a divorce conversation

So what should you do when a worker breaks the bad news about trouble on the homefront? Here are a few tips for managers and HR professionals:

- Be compassionate, empathetic and supportive — do not act as a problem-solver.
- Once an employee shares his personal situation with you, direct him to appropriate resources, such as the employee assistance program (EAP) or other appropriate individuals or departments.
- Be a good listener — when an employee speaks about his personal issue, be respectful. Turn off the phone, turn away from your computer and listen. Show that you care.
- If you have been through divorce yourself, avoid saying: “I’ve been through it too and I know what you are going through.” Keep your distance and avoid becoming the go-to person for divorce issues. Maintain your role as manager and don’t become the therapist. Avoid sharing personal details of your divorce and do not provide advice.
- Refocus the employee so he gets his information from the experts and proper resources — not divorced colleagues or media reports.

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