

A guide for managers on how to speak to someone in your team about compassionate leave

Death is something many people find difficult to even think about, let alone talk about. And we all deal with death and grief so differently. Some people take time to begin processing what's happened, whereas others may process it almost immediately. This can make it challenging for managers to know what to say when someone in their team needs to go on compassionate leave.

Every day, we talk to people who are dealing with death - and we've done lots of work on the best ways to do that, thinking about the language we use, the questions we ask, the support we offer and how to follow up. So we wanted to share some of the things we've learnt to help managers when someone in their team is dealing with death.

1 Be understanding and resist the temptation to ask why they need to leave

The person asking might not be comfortable sharing why they're going on leave or might still be processing the death and not ready to talk about it. It's more important to support them with the request than to understand the reason why they need need it.

Here are a few examples of how the person who is taking the compassionate leave might ask for it and ways for you to respond in an understanding way:

Team member: *"I need to take 5 days of compassionate leave. I've read through our policy and know the reasons are in line with our guidelines."*

Your response might be: *"Thanks for letting me know. I completely trust that you'll take the number of days that you need. If you realise later on that you'd like to take more or less days that's okay too."*

Team member: *"I'd like to take some compassionate leave for personal reasons. I'd really appreciate your support on this."*

Your response might be: *"You have my support. You're an important member of the team and I trust you know best what's right for you. How many days would you like to take? You can change this later on if you realise you'd like to take more or less days."*

2 Ask permission to share why they're on leave with the wider team

As a manager, you should ask for explicit permission from the person asking for compassionate leave about what details to share. You should ask whether they would prefer not to be contacted by any of the other members of the team. Some may prefer people to know why they're on leave, but for others this would save them having to explain it when they return from leave.

Here's an example of how you could approach that conversation:

"I'm going to let the team know you're taking some time off. Would you like me to let your teammates know why? Or to make it clear you're taking leave for private reasons and it's important they give you space right now?"

Your colleague may suggest a change in phrasing which can be a good way to make the whole process feel more collaborative.

It's important to discourage your team from reaching out to the person who has gone on leave or to ask questions to try to find out what's happened, unless they've specifically said that's okay. Make sure your team knows that it's important to give the person space.

3 Ask them how they want to be contacted

The process of going on compassionate leave runs a lot more smoothly if you and the person going on compassionate leave have an open discussion around if and how they'd like to be contacted. This means being upfront and asking them what they need from you. This might sound like:

"Before you go on leave, can I check in on how you want us to communicate while you're off? Would you like me to contact you or would you prefer to get in touch with me?"

If they say they'd prefer for you to contact them you could ask:

"Great. I'll get in touch in [the number of days the person has said they'd like to take] days' time by email to see if you're ready to catch up. If you're ready then we can have a phone call or keep emailing to talk about next steps. If you need some more time then we can talk about how we can make that work."

The most important thing here is that both you and the person taking leave are clear about what you expect from one another. It's also helpful if the person taking leave doesn't get stressed by the idea of you 'chasing' them or else the leave won't give them the space they need.

Everyone is different so some may find the idea of waiting for one big check-in difficult and would prefer catching up every couple of days. But it's quite likely that they'll need some time completely away from work. It's also reassuring and empowering for someone to feel like they can decide what's best for them, and can change their mind once they've had time to process what they're going through.

There are also some default positions it's helpful to take. The first is to assume that the person asking for compassionate leave will take the full allowance of days in the policy, and the second is that the person would be ok for you to check in with them.

When you do check in with the person who has gone on compassionate leave, do this in a human and empathetic way. Ask how they're doing and if there's anything you can do for them. If it fits in with your policy, let them know that they can take more or less time to make them feel supported.