

## LEADERSHIP



# Navigating the waters of pandemic grief

*Leaders play a vital role in helping us get through this*

*"Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is (raging) and overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim."*

— Vicki Harrison, author

**SIXTEEN YEARS AGO**, my husband, John Waldbauer, died. A few months later, a woman called me with a question: "Karen, do you think it is harder to go through a horribly painful divorce or lose your beloved husband of 20 years?"

That night, I was given an extra dose of grace when I responded, "Pat, I have never gone through a divorce. So, I don't know what that is like. And even for those who have lost a spouse, I hope they would not assume that they know exactly what I am going through, because no one else has loved and lived with John Waldbauer for 20 years."

Author, professor and researcher Brene Brown dubs this exchange as comparative suffering. We are so tempted to compare our suffering to others and then decide that our suffering is either worse than the other, or we minimize our own experience with statements like: "Others have it far worse than I do right now." Grief is grief.

Grief is a natural response to loss. It is the emotional suffering you feel when something or someone you love is taken away from you. It may manifest itself in physical disease, headaches, back pain, lack of appetite, fatigue, etc. You may experience more irritability, confusion, lack of focus, etc.

## PANDEMIC GRIEF

The global COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic has resulted in collective grief. The loss of food, housing, jobs, school, business, sports, concerts, transportation, and, for some, the death of a family member or friend.

No one is immune. We live with the fear of the unknown and look for ways to respond.

Our better angels have shown up as they always do in crisis. And our better angels have made a difference. They are the health care workers, risking their lives to care for COVID-19 patients.

They are the caregivers in nursing homes, the police and firemen and women, postal workers, teachers, workers in food service, finance and transportation. They are the men and women seeking public office in order to serve, and men and women in our armed forces.

Better angels have shown up as leaders that recognize our collective grief and are committed to supporting employees through the complex transitions necessary during these unpredictable days.

## LEADING THROUGH GRIEF

While rarely named in business, we are witnessing one another's grief. In these uncharted waters, leaders have an opportunity to recognize in themselves and help their employees to recognize and name their experiences of loss.

Elizabeth Kubler Ross, author of many books on death and dying, identified five stages of grief. Elizabeth was very clear to name the stages as descriptive, not prescriptive. She helped us to appreciate that grieving is not a linear process.

The stages she identified are:

- » **Denial:** "This can't be happening."
- » **Anger:** "Why is this happening to me?"
- » **Bargaining:** "I'll do anything to change this."
- » **Depression:** "What's the point of going on after the loss?"
- » **Acceptance:** "It's going to be OK."

Here we are. Two months ago, there were rapid-fire initiatives to move people from their offices to home. We experienced denial, anger, bargaining, etc. Soon there will be initiatives to bring employees back. Howev-

er, they will not return to the same environment. Risks to our health will continue to require physical distancing, hand washing, etc. Offices will be reconfigured. Some employees will continue to work from home by necessity. Leaders will be challenged to lead!

Leaders will need to be aware of and recognize the stages of grief within themselves as well as in those they serve. They will need to appreciate that for each person, the process will be different. The process will not be linear, and the process, for many, is not likely to be easy.

With all the challenges before us, I have confidence that our better angels will continue to show up.

I believe the generosity and kindness that this pandemic has elicited will continue.

I believe that our choices will reflect our hopes and not our fears. And I believe we will lead less with judgment, and more with compassion, a gift for generations to come.

Leaders will help us to navigate the calm waters and the raging waters. We will learn how to swim together. ■



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