



The need to lead during tragedy

The loss of a fellow police officer is one of the most difficult tragedies to work through. Officers lose their lives in the course of their work, and by their own hand. Suicide can be even more difficult for co-workers to deal with because it occurs at work or is believed to be due to the impact of traumatic events experienced on the job.

A death can impact even those that did not know an officer because they can identify with their difficult experiences. Some might even fear that they might one day meet the same fate. Supervisors and senior officers can assist others by demonstrating grief leadership, demonstrating behaviour that enables healthy coping in those grieving a tragic event. Grief leadership entails the healthy expression of grief, facilitating communications, empowering others with information and demonstrating healthy coping.

Leaders openly express emotional reactions to tragic events. This healthy demonstration of emotions helps to de-stigmatize normal human reactions that have typically been labeled as signs of weakness. Traditional police culture calls for an artificially stoic

reaction to ALL events, not just those where officers must suppress their fears and emotions to focus on getting the job done. During times of tragedies true leaders will offer a healthy demonstration of grief.

Personally, I am not motivated by nor trusting of people who hide the way they feel or, worse yet, feel nothing when a fellow officer dies. By demonstrating their grief, leaders show that you don't have to stuff your emotions and pretend that everything is alright when it isn't. It takes a lot more courage to be vulnerable than it does to act like everything is fine. A leader's healthy demonstration of grief makes it more likely that others will also express their grief. Senior officers, whether supervisors or not, will be role models for more junior officers on how to react to a tragic event.

Leaders say what others feel but do not say. In speaking unspoken feelings, leaders open up communications between officers about how they are interpreting the event. When tragedies occur there is a tendency to try to make meaning of the event, evaluating it to determine what could have (or should have)

been done to prevent it.

Some of this meaning-making is vocalized and oftentimes people play the "blame game" regarding how the event could have been avoided. This tendency is exacerbated by the fact that police officers have training and experience detecting suicidality in others and taking measures to prevent or at least delay suicidal behaviour with members of the public. For this reason, they may blame others for not preventing the officer's suicide – an uncaring supervisor or administration, a work partner or a spouse.

Colleagues might even blame themselves if they knew the suicidal officer. Normalizing feelings of guilt as part of the grieving process would aid them in realizing that just because they feel the guilt does not mean that it is appropriate or deserved. It would also help officers to learn that they are not alone in their interpretation of the event. If others feel the same way, the reaction feels more normal than a personal failing or weakness.

Leaders provide as much information as possible. Clearly, there are circumstances where not all information can be disclosed but all details that can be released should be, along with an explanation about what cannot be revealed and the reason why. Some of the information provided would relate to the details of the event itself. This will hopefully stifle the rumor mill and officers' search for information, which might not be accurate.

General information about suicide, grief and coping would also be helpful for police officers trying to make sense of the tragedy. For instance, leaders would be well-advised to explain that most police suicides are a surprise because officers are skillful at hiding their pain. So, instead of blaming people for not noticing a co-workers pain or for not doing something about it, officers could learn that they might be asking for something that was just not possible.

Lastly, leaders aim to lead by example in every aspect of healthy coping – taking care of their health with exercise, nutrition and abstaining from substance abuse, making use of social and professional support and maintaining work-life balance.

Grief leadership isn't about telling others what they should be doing to cope with the impact of the event. It is about showing what is helpful. It's about walking the walk and inviting others to walk with you.

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