

5 Ways Grief Is Impacting Your Team (And What HR Can Do About It)

By Cortne Lee Smith

Creator of The Grief-Informed Leadership Lab™

Grief is already present in your workplace.

Not just from loss—but from life transitions, burnout, unmet expectations, and silent struggles your employees carry every day.

The challenge?

Most organizations are not equipped to recognize it—let alone lead through it.

So it shows up in ways that impact what matters most:

- Productivity
- Engagement
- Retention
- Team culture

This guide will help you identify **5 hidden ways grief is impacting your team**—and give you practical, leadership-ready solutions to respond with both **clarity and confidence**.

1. Disengagement That Looks Like “Lack of Motivation”

What’s Really Happening:

Employees experiencing grief often disengage—not because they don’t care, but because they are emotionally overwhelmed.

You may notice:

- Decreased participation
- Missed deadlines

- Quiet withdrawal in meetings

The Risk:

Mislabeling grief as poor performance can lead to:

- Unnecessary disciplinary action
- Loss of high-value employees
- Increased turnover

What HR Can Do:

- Train managers to **recognize emotional shifts vs. performance issues**
 - Encourage **check-in conversations, not assumptions**
 - Normalize language like:
“I’ve noticed a shift—how can I support you?”
-

2. Presenteeism (They’re There... But Not Fully There)

What’s Really Happening:

Employees show up physically but are mentally and emotionally elsewhere.

Grief impacts:

- Focus
- Memory
- Decision-making

The Risk:

- Decreased productivity across teams
- Increased errors
- Leadership frustration without clear cause

What HR Can Do:

- Offer **flexible work options during high-impact periods**
 - Equip leaders with **grief-informed communication tools**
 - Build policies that acknowledge **human capacity fluctuates**
-

3. Increased Conflict and Team Tension

What's Really Happening:

Unprocessed grief often expresses as:

- Irritability
- Short communication
- Emotional reactivity

The Risk:

- Breakdown in team trust
- Miscommunication escalating quickly
- Toxic work environments forming quietly

What HR Can Do:

- Train leaders in **emotional intelligence and conflict de-escalation**
 - Introduce **team reset conversations**
 - Create space for **safe expression without judgment**
-

4. Burnout That Won't Resolve with Time Off

What's Really Happening:

Grief and burnout are deeply connected.

When grief is ignored:

- Rest doesn't restore
- Time off doesn't resolve
- Exhaustion becomes chronic

The Risk:

- Long-term disengagement
- Increased sick time
- Leadership pipeline weakening

What HR Can Do:

- Integrate **grief awareness into wellness initiatives**
 - Provide access to **structured support experiences**
 - Shift from “time off” to **true emotional recovery strategies**
-

5. Leadership Avoidance (Managers Don’t Know What to Say)

What’s Really Happening:

Many leaders avoid conversations around grief because:

- They feel unprepared
- They fear saying the wrong thing
- They were never trained to handle it

The Risk:

- Employees feel unsupported
- Trust in leadership decreases
- Culture becomes emotionally disconnected

What HR Can Do:

- Provide **grief-informed leadership training**
 - Equip managers with **simple, practical language frameworks**
 - Reinforce that leadership is not about fixing—it’s about **showing up well**
-

The Truth Most Organizations Miss

Grief is not a personal issue employees leave at home.

It is a **workplace reality** that directly impacts performance, culture, and retention.

Organizations that recognize this don’t become weaker—they become **more resilient, more connected, and more effective**.

How to Take the Next Step

If your organization is ready to:

- Equip leaders with real tools
- Strengthen team connection
- Address what's unspoken but deeply felt

You're invited to explore:

The ALIGN™

A 3-Day Grief-Informed Leadership & Team Alignment Experience
Powered by The Align Ecosystem

Or

The Grief-Informed Leadership Lab™

Training and consulting designed for HR and leadership teams

Let's Start the Conversation

Schedule a leadership consultation:

cortne@cortneleesmith.info

Supporting your people through grief isn't an extra responsibility.

It's the leadership work that changes everything.

And when done well—
it doesn't just heal people...

It transforms organizations.