

When a colleague has cancer it can impact the whole team. Here are some ways to support them throughout the process.

Finding out a colleague has cancer, particularly if you work very closely with them, can be a big shock. Often they are our friends as well as colleagues and the organisation's focus is very much on supporting the affected employee. This is as it should be, but the impact on the wider team shouldn't be underestimated. Team members are likely to experience a range of different emotions, which may depend on the stage of their colleague's cancer treatment and how closely they work with them. These include sadness, concern, anxiety, uncertainty, and confusion.

One of the main things colleagues may find hard is communication – not discussing feelings, or knowing what to say and how to react, could affect the overall performance of the team. A team that is used to working well together where everyone is clear on priorities, responsibilities and what needs to be achieved may have to adjust to working in a different way and the realisation that their colleague's priorities will have changed or they just can't do what they used to do. Anyone with cancer will be focussed on getting through treatment and may not be as concerned about delivery deadlines, or be well enough to attend meetings or make phone calls. If communication is avoided because of awkwardness then this can make the situation worse as staff are left to draw their own conclusions. Home workers may also feel particularly isolated and out of the loop.

Here are a few ways in which the team can be supported, or support themselves, throughout their colleague's cancer journey:

- Managers should make the time to understand from the employee affected how much information they want shared and with whom, then work within this framework. If they are an extrovert they are more likely to be open about what they are feeling, whereas introverts may want to say very little and keep their diagnosis and treatment as private as possible. Explain that the team want to be supportive and ask them the best ways in which they can do this.
- Get the balance of communication right for everyone by agreeing frequency, channel and approach etc. Give the team regular updates and make sure everyone is included, especially home workers.
- Schedule a social get together. If the person feels well enough to get out of the house, ask if they'd like to go for a walk or join you and some other friends from work for lunch. Even without much of an appetite, enjoying the company of others while talking and laughing creates a more normal environment and can be therapeutic for the affected colleague.
- Assess how the team is feeling through regular catch ups. Managers should be aware of how team members are dealing with things and notice any out of

character behaviour. Consider offering counselling or other support (within the limits of confidentiality), particularly if a colleague has terminal cancer. It is natural to have strong feelings so don't hesitate to ask for support in dealing with emotions of your own. It may help to talk to another manager in your workplace.

- Be flexible and adaptable – discuss ideas within the team on how workload can be managed in such a way that their colleague still feels able to contribute without too much pressure. For example urgent/deadline driven activity could be reallocated, but discuss this with your employee first before making any changes to see if they have any ideas. If you involve them in any cover arrangements you put in place, it is likely to be easier for them to accept the fact that someone else is doing their job for the time being.
- Be resilient and prepared for changes when the colleague returns to work – don't expect the colleague to pick up where exactly they left off as they may not necessarily want to, or be able to come back to what they were doing, at least for the time being, so make sure the team know about any changes and feel informed. Continue to check in and review things with them to ensure ongoing flexibility as they readjust, and manage the team's expectations and assumptions.
- Bereavement – have a process to deal with death at work. Many companies offer this so ensure you know what is available to you and your team.

For more information on the support that Working with Cancer can provide to managers, employees and teams, including coaching and workshops, please visit or contact www.workingwithcancer.co.uk

Written by Maggie Newton, Working with Cancer Associate