

**SPECIAL FEATURE: MANAGING TO THE MISSION – FRESH IDEAS IN HR**



## Five Ways to Make Your Workplace “Grief Ready”

*By Angeline Thomas<sup>1</sup>*

By February of 2018, I had lost my dad unexpectedly, what would have been my second child at 9 weeks into my pregnancy, and my mom to cancer, 7 months apart. I was 37.



At the time, I was the executive director of a small policy-focused nonprofit. As one of only two employees, my organization was completely unprepared to navigate these losses. There was no employee handbook

outlining our bereavement policy, no guidance on sharing the workload with my single colleague, and no employee assistance program to help me grapple with grief. The lack of support I needed led to burnout and eventually, my resignation.

My organization was not grief ready, but it should have been.

“Grief Readiness” is a term coined by The Dinner Party’s Workplace Resilience Initiative. Being grief ready is proactively preparing for the impacts of grief experiences on employee well-being and workflow.

According to the Grief Recovery Institute, <https://www.griefrecoverymethod.com>, companies lose \$75B due to mismanaged grief in the workplace. One in four employees are experiencing a loss at any time. And the Department of Labor doesn’t require any benefits like bereavement leave. With 6.3 million family members grieving from COVID losses and counting, this was unacceptable before the pandemic, and it is even more unacceptable now.

As the pandemic has showed all of us, loss is about way more than just death. Loss comes in many forms

including plans, friendship, marriage, financial security, childcare, sense of normalcy, and routine. And the vicarious trauma that accompanies watching racial injustice and global conflict, like the war in Ukraine, only compounds our sense of vulnerability.

The grief wave is already here, and your workplaces are feeling it. So, what can you do to get your organization grief ready? Here are five tips.

### #1 Prioritize trust building before there is a crisis.

Creating a culture where employees are encouraged to bring their whole selves to work and where losses of all kinds are routinely acknowledged will build the support and psychological safety to navigate a crisis.

Loss affects us mentally, physically, emotionally, and socially, so a big part of being grief ready is proactive planning. Here are three ways to prepare before a crisis:

- Get familiar with what resources and options are available. Does your organization have a bereavement policy? When was it last updated? Does it feel reasonable and compassionate?
- How does your organization honor other types of losses? What do you do when some horrible injustice is in the news? What do you do when

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an employee leaves? When a project reaches completion?

- When a new employee is on-boarded, are there things your organization does to make them feel included like keeping track of birthdays, work anniversaries, or other milestones?

Creating a culture of openness, inclusivity, and humanity will ensure that, when a crisis does happen, there are more likely to be open lines of communication and feelings of psychological safety to handle it.

## #2 Take stock: How grief sensitive is your organization?

After I returned home from my mom’s funeral, my board of directors told me “to take all the time I needed” but as a two-person organization, it felt nearly impossible to remove any work from my plate.

In those first few days and weeks back at my desk, I remember feeling disoriented, unable to focus, and unsure of who I could reach out to for support. We had just launched a major donor campaign, were actively planning a huge fundraiser, and were finishing up one of the largest projects the organization had ever taken on. Stepping back felt impossible. Yet, continuing at the same pace as I had before my parents died, felt impossible too. When I resigned, despite it being one of the most prosperous years in the organization’s history, the organization folded because they did not have a plan. And for me, this was one more horrible loss.

Culture around loss is a make-or-break issue for employee engagement. It affects employee retention, effectiveness, and your organization’s reputation.

For most employees, going back to work after a loss can be isolating, overwhelming, discouraging, where they are present, but not really present. For some, work is supportive, confidence building, a welcome distraction, a time to build loyalty, and an anchor in an otherwise overwhelmingly difficult circumstance. Ensuring that your workplace is a supportive anchor will require thoughtfulness, intention, and resources.

Taking stock about how sensitive your organization is includes:

- Ask what it is like to be an acutely grieving person in your organization?
- How do colleagues interact with that person?
- What is the impact on the grieving person’s colleagues who are absorbing their workload, or

the people who report into them who have a boss who is not available?

Being grief ready is thinking about the whole ecosystem and how grief can cause ripple effects across teams. Speaking about what it was like to have a coworker out on bereavement leave, one The Dinner Party Workplace Resilience workshop participant said, “We all split up his workload when he was out, which was hard because it was our busiest time of year. But it did make me feel like if something happened to me, our team would do the same. It makes me feel secure and proud to work here.”

## #3 Put clear protocols, training, and cultural norms in place to minimize people being unprepared for a loss.

When my parents died, my organization had just started strategic planning which included getting our legal house in order, like having an up-to-date employee handbook, but there was nothing in place to guide us in navigating the worst moments of my life. Small organizations often struggle with dedicating time to important but seemingly non-urgent tasks like bereavement policies, particularly when they are strapped for resources. For large organizations, having clear policies and protocols around grief can also feel like #75 on your list of priorities until tragedy strikes.

Here are some important questions to assess your protocols, training, and cultural norms:

- What policies or support systems does your organization have in place?
- Are those policies being followed? Are the benefits well known and used? Is there any inequity in the way the benefits are being administered?
- Do you know what is legally required in your state, or industry-standard with peers or competitors?
- Does leadership recognize grief readiness in the workplace is a priority?
- What training is offered for managers?

If you find that your answers to these questions are unsatisfactory, here are some resources to consider. Many organizations offer workshops, consultation, trainings, and online classes to increase your grief readiness competence and/or to walk you through navigating grief in the workplace moment-by-moment. Check out The Dinner Party’s Workplace Resilience Initiative, A Grief Warrior, Lantern, and Alicia Fornet as places to get started.

#### #4 Humanize and standardize the way you welcome an employee back.

My mom collapsed on a Sunday night and was in a coma for three days before we decided to remove life support. I caught a 6 a.m. flight from Seattle to California on Monday morning to be at her bedside and help my brother and sister make medical decisions since our dad had just died 7 months prior. Back at work, there were questions about what to tell people, who should tell them, which projects could wait, whether deadlines could be moved, and no road map for any of it.

When I returned to work after the funeral, there were flowers and condolence cards on my desk. This was very thoughtful, but there was not much thought given to what was next. I was still in shock.

We had a board meeting later that week. I have vivid memories of the awkward silence around the most painful moment of my life. I do not blame my colleagues. We rarely know what to say when someone is experiencing unimaginable loss and pain. Sometimes, saying nothing is far better than offering an empty platitude or pity, but being “grief illiterate” has consequences.

Society teaches us the grief is something you respect by not addressing it, but nothing could be further from the truth. The only thing I wanted to talk about after my parents’ deaths was my parents!

While not everyone will want to talk about their loved one who died, honoring grief is in the witnessing and acknowledging. That is why we have funerals. When you see someone grieving, you are seeing someone who has had their heart broken and your ability to witness their pain is deeply healing.

Contrary to our cultural norms, good managers and leaders run towards the pain, not away from it. While there are no magic questions to ask, two good ones to start with are “what is this like for you?” and “how can I support you?”

To assess how well you humanize a loss and welcome an employee back, start with these questions:

- In the event of someone taking leave or experiencing a loss, what will the organization communicate right away to the employee, leadership team, their colleagues, their clients? What does the *grieving person* want communicated, when, and by whom?
- How will the organization hand off the work the employee was supposed to do? How will you set expectations with other teammates?
- Is there a small budget available to let the employee know that the team has their back? Do you know

what would feel supportive for them?

- How would we respond if this person were: more senior, had more tenure, were higher paid, a different gender or race? Is our re-entry plan equitable?
- Is this a loss experience that qualifies someone for paid leave? When can they use it? If not, in what instances does our organization override or extend the policy to offer additional days off?
- How will you acknowledge the loss?

#### #5 Be an advocate inside and outside of your organization.

My parents’ deaths felt like an earthquake, followed by a massive tsunami that threatened to drown me with unrelenting waves of salty water, full of sharp and unforgiving debris. Nothing would ever be the same. Aftershocks and tidal waves of varying degrees washed over me again and again in those early days of acute grief. Yet, I still had to show up at work every day. Having a supportive coworker who could share the workload, postpone a meeting when I needed to cry, and check in with how I was *really* doing made all the difference.

Even after four years, grief waves sneak up on me when I least expect it. Coming to terms with the loss of a loved one(s) takes months, years, if not a lifetime, to fully digest and heal from. Grief is not something we “get over,” it’s something we learn to swim in, with lots of help. So, isn’t it about time that we acknowledge and treat it that way at work?

The pandemic has made grief something that once happened to “someone else,” something that has now happened to all of us. The difficult truth is that we are all going to die, which means someone we love is going to die. Love does not end when someone dies, or when something meaningful to us ends. Love transforms into grief. Grief is love.

After I resigned, I took some time off, and eventually felt led to change careers from law to hospital chaplaincy. I currently work at a level one trauma center in Seattle where I help patients and their families through losses of all kinds.

As a chaplain, I have come to understand that each person’s grief is as unique as their relationship with the person who died. How much we grieve correlates to how much we love, or did not love. The primary emotion may not be sadness, especially if there was estrangement or other difficult circumstances surrounding the death. The griever could be angry, numb, scared, overwhelmed, or any number of other

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things which is why its never safe to assume how someone may be feeling. Grief is messy. Yet we treat grief in the workplace like having a cold, expecting employees to be back to normal after a few days of rest and chicken soup.

The future of work requires that we think differently about how we address and include grief in the workplace. That can start with you being an advocate.

So, what would an equitable and fair grief policy look like? Here are some things to consider:

- Remove qualifiers for immediate family. Typically, bereavement policies only provide for death of immediate family which consists of parents, in-laws, children, siblings, spouse, domestic partner, guardian, or grandparent. However, this is not how emotional proximity actually works. Consider expanding the net to include a co-worker, a non-traditional family member, household member, community partner with whom an employee has regular close contact, another individual whom the employee identifies, or even a pet.
- Increase the length of time and flexibility around how an employee can take time off. Most companies offer around 3 days of bereavement leave which was originally only enough time to go to a funeral. Grief doesn't end within a few days, weeks, or months. Consider increasing the amount of time available to as much as your organization can afford and offer flexibility on how an employee can use the time. For instance, an employee might need time to regroup near or on the anniversary of a loved one's death.
- Include miscarriage in what qualifies as a death. Individuals who experience a miscarriage deal with unique and severe grief, but miscarriage is rarely covered by company bereavement plans. Specifying it as part of a bereavement policy shows support for workers and their families.
- Create a leave donation bank. Leave sharing programs allow employees to donate accrued paid time off, vacation, or sick leave to a general pool to be used by fellow employees who experience a loss and have exhausted all paid leave available to them.
- Offer grief counseling. Many organizations already provide some type of mental health support to employees, and this is the time to remind people that it is available.
- Support managers with access to training and

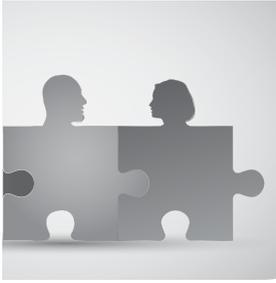
support. Most managers never expected that “grief literacy” was going to be a required skillset. Invest in trainings like the ones described above.

As a self-proclaimed “grief nerd,” I am hopeful and inspired by the growing movement to face grief in the workplace head on. For instance, organizations like Columbia Legal Services just updated their compassionate leave policy to remove qualifiers of who counts; they increased the amount of leave from 4 to 10 days; added flexibility on how and when an employee can use the time off; recognized that grief is ongoing, and made provision for future grieving after one year.

If you want to join the movement too, start at your workplace and check out organizations like Evermore, <https://live-evermore.org>, that are fighting to make bereavement leave a legal right nationwide. If you need help working through the particulars, please give me a call.

- 1 Angeline Thomas (she/her) is a bi-racial (Black/White) adult orphan, wife, mother, yogi, former public interest attorney turned hospital chaplain, avid traveler, and a student of grief. She lost eight close family members between 2016-2020, including both her parents and what would have been her second child, seven months apart. Following these losses, Angeline quit her legal job, sold her house, and bought one-way tickets to Asia with her husband and then four-year-old son. Angeline believes in the transformative power of pilgrimage, sabbatical, and journeying deep into grief. Angeline currently works as a per diem chaplain at Harborview Medical Center and offers one-on-one spiritual coaching for individuals navigating seasons of discernment, life transitions, questions of faith and doubt, Dark Nigw-whts of the Soul, grief, and exploration of spirituality. Angeline completed an 18-month certificate course through the Spiritual Guidance Training Institute and welcomes seekers of all faiths, multiple faiths, yet to be defined faith, and of no faith. Angeline can be reached at [Angeline.m.thomas@gmail.com](mailto:Angeline.m.thomas@gmail.com) or at 630-903-5565.

The future of work requires that we think differently about how we address and include grief in the workplace. That can start with you being an advocate.



# WHAT I LEARNED FROM 170 ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS WITH MY COLLEAGUES DURING COVID

*By Jon Laramore, Executive Director<sup>1</sup>  
Indiana Legal Services, Inc.*

Between late 2020 and September 2021, I met individually, one-on-one, with each of the 170 employees of the legal aid program I direct. I asked them what we



were doing well, what we could do better, and what was their vision of our future. Why did I do it? What did I learn? Was it a good idea?

## What I Did In 2015

When I became executive director of Indiana

Legal Services (ILS) in 2015, I was an outsider to the program. I had been a legal aid lawyer early in my career, then spent more than two decades in government and private practice. When I started as ED of ILS in 2015, I needed to introduce myself to the staff and learn about them.

I therefore announced that I would promptly visit each of our eight offices and meet individually with each ILS staff member, who numbered about 110 at that time. We had a large office in Indianapolis and smaller offices ranging from half a dozen to a dozen staff in other cities around the state. Over my first few months, I visited each office outside Indianapolis; in a one-day visit I usually was able to meet in person with every person for 20 or 30 minutes. I met with Indianapolis staff, who numbered closer to 50, over a few weeks. I generally met with each person in their own office. These meetings gave me a good chance to introduce myself and learn about our programs and employees. The meetings were invaluable to me as a new director.

## What I Did In 2020

Around the time of my fifth anniversary as ED on March 1, 2020 (note the date), I announced that I would repeat what I did in 2015, meeting individually with each staff member.

Before I could even start, COVID happened. And

I did nothing to fulfill my promise of individual meetings until almost the end of 2020.

By late 2020, however, we all knew how to meet remotely using our Teams app, and I began to schedule meetings with staff to fulfill my promise. By then, ILS had grown substantially, in part because of the influx of COVID-related funding. We had around 180 employees.

Over the next several months, I met individually, almost always by video, with 170 of my colleagues.<sup>2</sup> Unlike my initial round of meetings in 2015, when I traveled to our regional offices and talked with every person in the office in a single day, all these meetings were remote. In 2021, in contrast, I paid no attention to regional office boundaries. Instead, I scheduled meetings ten at a time, with each group consisting of about half Indianapolis employees and half from various regional offices, and roughly half lawyers and half non-lawyers, mirroring the makeup of our staff.

I asked each person the same set of questions, although the wording evolved a bit over the weeks I conducted the meetings:

- Tell me something you think ILS is doing well and tell me one or more things we could be doing better.
- In your vision of a better ILS 5 or 10 years from now, how do we look different?
- Are there any areas of law we should consider adding to what we already do?
- How can we focus our law practice more on racial equity?

I asked them what we were doing well, what we could do better, and what was their vision of our future. Why did I do it? What did I learn? Was it a good idea?

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In each meeting, I took notes on a paper form I created. At the end of the process, I collated the responses and produced a report, which I sent to our board of directors and to all staff members so they could review all the responses.<sup>3</sup>

This exercise allowed me to take the organization's temperature and to assemble a list of issues that concerned our staff. This information helped inform the strategic planning process we executed in the second half of 2021. After pulling together my report on the interviews, I felt like my organization was in a pretty good place, all things considered (including COVID and remote work). I finished my interviews right around the time when the eviction moratorium expired, before many of our staff came under the pressures of that difficult practice.

### What Did My Colleagues Say?

The details of what I learned from the interviews are not the main point of this article, but here is a brief overview.

In response to my question about what we are doing well, a total of 46 of my colleagues responded by talking about collegiality, camaraderie, connection to one another, flexible work environment, healthy work culture, and feeling valued at work. Another 26 specifically mentioned our focus on health and wellness, which is the subject of another *Journal* article.<sup>4</sup> Others commended our response to COVID, and a similarly sized group talked about our client service and good results we get for clients. Here are some quotes:

- "Everyone who is here wants to be here and wants to help people."

By far the highest number of responses referred to improving our onboarding and training for new employees . . . Other responses included better publicizing ILS and its services, improving our website, and making our administrative structure more transparent.

- "We are phenomenal at bread-and-butter direct service."
- "We serve clients well and with great compassion, and we have compassion for each other."

I grouped together the responses to my questions about what ILS could be doing better and the staff member's vision for ILS five to ten years in the future because many of the same topics came up in response to the two different questions. By far the highest number of responses referred to improving our onboarding and training for new employees (in essence, I got the same number of complaints on this issue as the number of new employees we onboarded during COVID — that is a strong message). Other responses included better publicizing ILS and its services, improving our website, and making our administrative structure more transparent.

The comments specifically directed at a five-to-ten-year future vision included growth (having a larger staff); having more partnerships and community connections; better brand recognition for ILS (through advocacy and social media); using technology to serve more people, especially in rural areas; centralizing our work in certain subject areas to serve more people more efficiently; and adding more social workers.

On the question about new areas of law we should consider adding, the majority of those responding had no suggestions. Two practice areas, education law and expanded work in guardianships, were each mentioned by about a dozen people.

The final question I asked was about increasing the focus of our law practice on racial equity. This question was challenging for many of my colleagues. The largest number of responses, 41, said we should continue to provide regular training on racial equity, implicit bias, and cultural competency, including mandatory training for new hires. The second-largest number of responses encouraged additional partnerships and outreach to diverse BIPOC groups. Others provided suggestions for increased recruiting aimed at hiring a more diverse workforce. Other suggestions included pursuing litigation raising race equity issues, caring for staff of color and amplifying their voices, and establishing affinity groups or caucuses. Several suggested specific practice areas relevant to diverse populations.

### What Did We Do?

When I announced my plan for these meetings pre-COVID, strategic planning was little more than a gleam in our eyes. But as it became clear that we would

do strategic planning in 2021, we realized these meetings were a great way to collect information and ideas from our colleagues to use in strategic planning. Many of the ideas I listed in the prior paragraphs became central to our strategic planning or plan implementation. Our history is to use the strategic plan as a focus for change in our organization; we implemented more than 80% of the goals in our prior plan. So adding these ideas to our 2021 plan is more than lip service.

“Ensure that all aspects of our work are grounded in racial equity” is the first goal of our plan, and it includes nearly all the items listed above in the paragraph regarding that response — training, partnerships, outreach, recruiting, incorporating a race equity lens in our case acceptance and strategic advocacy, and amplifying the voices of staff of color; most of these plan elements are matched with measurable outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

The strategic plan also addresses other issues staff identified in our meetings, including revamping onboarding, increasing training for new staff, overhauling our website, more publicity for our services, improving internal transparency, increasing partnerships and outreach, and adding social work staff.

My individual meetings with staff did more than provide information for our strategic plan. They gave me an opportunity to connect people doing similar work — when someone in our Evansville office raised issues about his expungement cases, I could refer him to an expert colleague in our Fort Wayne office who could provide advice. It also allowed me to connect with less experienced lawyers, to talk with them about ILS’s history and culture, and to help them feel connected with the whole organization — including those they do not work with directly or see regularly in our (virtual or brick-and-mortar) offices.

Poignantly, I learned during these meetings that two of our younger lawyers found out from family members after they joined our organization that ILS had given their families important legal help when they were growing up. This information was an unexpected by-product of my meetings and proved once again the value of our services to real people with real needs.

### **What Else Did We Learn?**

From my perspective as a leader, these meetings were invaluable. They helped me understand on a granular level what was on the minds of my colleagues — and, to a degree, what was in their hearts. It allowed me to gauge morale generally and, in some cases individually, to identify a colleague who needed extra help during COVID. In a few situations, I suggested to

managers that they spend additional time with a particular employee who felt especially disconnected during COVID and explore ways to build better connections.

It was great to hear my colleagues’ views that we were doing well on collegiality and camaraderie; that our response to COVID and transition to remote work had gone well; and that our attention to employee well-being and wellness was appreciated. I was happy to report those reactions to our board and management team. I am by nature a skeptic, and I tried to listen for staff telling the boss only what the boss wanted to hear. (I have emphasized collegiality as a key value throughout my time as ED, and lots of people told me we were good at collegiality.) But as much as I could judge based on tone, body language, and specific examples offered, staff’s positive comments were sincere.

Of course, a key value of the project was building connections. I had conversations with some colleagues whom I had previously talked with only briefly during a hiring interview. I also was able to talk with valued, longtime colleagues I had not seen in months because of COVID. It mattered to them, especially non-lawyer staff, to know that the boss was interested enough to spend 20 or 30 minutes talking just with them, writing down what they said, and promising to value their ideas. This aspect of the project probably has more impact in a large (180-person), far-flung (8 offices) organization (especially during COVID) than in a single office organization where the boss is always around. The time I invested amounted to a total of about two full work weeks spread over a 10-month period, and my colleagues appreciated this time commitment.

### **Would I Do It Again?**

This project took a lot of time and effort, but it produced important tangible and intangible results. I learned a lot from my colleagues, and much of that learning is being put into practice at ILS. This project also built connections and good will during a difficult time for our organization because of remote work and isolation. I would consider doing it again in a few years. Of course, the more our organization grows, the more complicated and resource-intensive a project like this becomes, and I would have to weigh those factors. Certainly, however, a project like this generates benefits that SurveyMonkey and similar products cannot produce. I have fond memories of my 170 meetings with colleagues, and I believe our entire organization benefits from these encounters.

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1 Jon Laramore has been executive director of Indiana Legal Services, an LSC-funded program, since March 2015. He began his career as a legal services lawyer, followed by work in state government and private practice, where he concentrated on appellate matters. He also is a member of Indiana’s access to justice commission, and the MIE Board of Directors and Journal Committee. Jon may be reached at [jon.laramore@ilsa.net](mailto:jon.laramore@ilsa.net).

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