

Creating a bereavement leave policy for your company

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In our February "Work on It" column, we addressed the benefits of having a bereavement leave policy. This month, we examine how to craft the right type of bereavement policy for your workplace. What type of bereavement leave should you offer and how much? Who will be eligible for leave? How should employees notify you of their need for leave? Answering those types of questions in a comprehensive bereavement leave policy helps you manage employees' expectations and respond to leave requests when the time arises. So, what should you include in your bereavement leave policy?

Define the relationship necessary to be eligible for leave. Bereavement leave policies should explain which relatives the leave covers. You might limit bereavement leave to immediate family members (e.g., parents, siblings, spouses, and children). Or the leave could be expanded to include extended family (e.g., aunts, uncles, and grandparents).

Designate the amount of available leave. The amount of time off you offer for bereavement leave can be the same for all employees regardless of the circumstances, or your policy can provide varying amounts of time off depending on the employee's relationship to the deceased family member. You may allow more time off when an immediate family dies (e.g., three days), while providing for a shorter period of leave for the death of an extended family member (e.g., one day to attend the funeral). You also may want to address whether more leave is offered based on out-of-state travel being involved (e.g., five days).

The trend is to move toward offering longer leave periods, but of course employees don't have to take

all of the available leave. If your policy is to offer different amounts of leave under different circumstances, you should document the amount of leave employees are granted and the reason behind your decision to approve the length of their leave.

Will the leave be paid? Your policy also should address whether bereavement leave will be paid or unpaid. If it's unpaid, you should state whether employees can elect to use their available paid leave (e.g., vacation time) in lieu of unpaid leave.

In our February article, we reported that 94 percent of U.S. employers offer paid bereavement leave. Of those, approximately 83 percent offer a separate plan for paid leave (i.e., bereavement leave isn't part of employees' paid vacation or sick time). The trend is moving toward offering paid bereavement leave, with the most recent statistics showing an 11 percent increase in paid leave policies over the past year. Employers that want to offer longer leave but can't afford extended paid leave may choose to offer paid leave for a few days, followed by extended unpaid leave.

Miscellaneous policy considerations. You should outline your expectations for how employees will notify you that they want to use bereavement leave. It can be as simple as following your other leave or attendance policy procedures. If you require proof of the need for leave, your policy should spell out the acceptable forms of proof (e.g., an obituary or a funeral program). Or, instead of requiring documentary proof, you may ask the employee for details (e.g., the relative's name, the date of death, where it occurred, and the employee's relationship to the decedent) and verify the information.

If your company is willing to grant special leave requests depending on the circumstances, your

policy should explain how an employee can go about making a special request. If you decide bereavement leave isn't flexible, your policy should be clear that the company will not make exceptions for special or unique circumstances. Having a clear policy will help you manage employee expectations and avoid requests that will inevitably be denied.

Get drafting

We hope this column has motivated you to take the next steps toward drafting or revising your bereavement leave policy so that it fits your company's needs. Remember, people grieve differently, so a flexible policy may be the way to go to address your employees' various coping needs. Employees should be allowed to choose whether to take extended bereavement leave to mourn the loss of a loved one or return to work quickly and get back to their routine.

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