

VIEW FROM THE CUBE

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Office mourning can be delicate, awkward

Colleagues veer between familial and professional urges

By Joanne Mason | December 3, 2006

"Frank didn't make it."

My boss said this one cold morning, shortly after New Year's. It was a slow period at the pension fund where we worked, and we had been going through some mail when our receptionist called with the news that Frank, our mailroom guy, had passed away after a long illness.

I had only worked with Frank for a year and a half, but in that time had gotten to know his personality by the way he mimicked a violinist — with dramatic exaggeration — whenever I brought my instrument in for an after-work lesson. He loved Maine and I had told him stories about my paternal grandparents, who worked for a resort on Moosehead Lake in the early 1920s. He was proud of his country and had a drawing of an American flag hung near the postage machine. "Hello, remember me?" the caption read.

He was particular about mailroom procedures. Whenever anyone needed to send out anything by UPS, he was our go-to person, carefully filling out the airbill and signing it with an official flair. Technically, anyone could sign the airbill, but to Frank, it was against regulations — until one day, when he was about to leave for vacation, he told me I could sign them myself. Indeed, years after his death, my boss and I would chuckle about the special authority Frank had granted me.

The day he died, we wondered about the protocol for grieving in the office. Could staff members greet clients with red eyes and puffy faces? Were we allowed to support each other only on our lunch breaks? No one really knew and we went through the day shuffling between familylike comfort and businesslike distance.

Frank's wake was held on one of the messiest nights that winter. I picked up a co-worker and we painstakingly slid our way to Medford, looping around the block several times in the slush to find parking. Inside, the funeral home was warm and oddly inviting. We stamped the snow off our boots, paid our respects to Frank and his family, and joined some colleagues by some overstuffed chairs.

I was surprised to see just how familylike my co-workers could be outside the office. We shared memories of Frank and even laughed a little. We all knew somehow that this was our time for unity. Tomorrow, back in the office, we'd be splintered again. True to prediction, the following morning was like any other business day, except that someone else handled the mail.

Another loss came the following year — a woman I did not know well. Our paths seldom crossed, except for an occasional wave on the T ride home. Her death took everyone by surprise. As was typical in my office, colleagues made plans to attend services and arranged rides for those without cars. HR sent out a memo with details and soon a sympathy card and collection made its rounds through the cubes.

I had a dilemma. Her wake was scheduled for a Sunday afternoon, one on which I had already invited friends over for a first-day-of-spring brunch. They were coming from a long distance and I had been planning it for months. In the meantime, my colleagues repeatedly asked me if I was all set with the directions. It seemed that everyone was going. Was I a horrible person for not going?

Shortly after her funeral, I encountered a colleague, one of her closest friends, crying at the copier. The co-worker looked embarrassed and turned away, hastily gathering her originals in a pile. I bit my lip, nervously wondering what was appropriate in a business setting. I did not know this co-worker well either.

But I remembered something our HR manager had said: "We're human beings first. Employees second." So I gave the co-worker a quick, clumsy hug. She smiled and told me how much she missed her friend. Her boss walked by and we both stiffened, concerned that talking this way on company time would get us into trouble.

We lost a third co-worker around Thanksgiving one year. Those of us who worked closely with her knew her vitality. Despite

being severely ill for years, she was always confident, always upbeat, a person you could call an inspiration without it sounding corny, a person you couldn't help but be glad to know. When she died at the age of 41, we in her cube neighborhood were shaken. Many were visibly upset. Yet, there were still customer service calls to take and trustees to feed.

There's no easy answer to that pendulum swing when grieving a colleague. Employees can be sad or not sad enough. The very notion that some reactions to a death in the workplace are acceptable and some are not is unsettling to me. For some managers, it's fine to be sad as long as that sadness doesn't interfere with the bottom line. For others, emotions need to be addressed before any work can get done. It gets trickier when an employee doesn't know the deceased all that well. What does skipping services or conducting business as usual say about one's character?

When our office moved after 30 years in Boston, Frank, the mailroom guy, had been gone for 10 years. Yet he left a legacy for us. During the chaos of packing, someone discovered a framed photograph of Frank and his wife, dressed up and smiling heartily at what we guessed was a work function, perhaps a holiday party. It had been hidden somewhere in the mailroom. Frank's wife had since passed away and the picture stood on top of moving boxes for weeks. I don't think anyone quite knew what to do with it. The more recent arrivals to our staff walked by and asked, "Who are these people? Are we taking this picture with us?"

Frank and his wife continued grinning at us while we sorted through old notices on postage increases and anthrax protection. They were there as we filled boxes with unused certificates that we were donating to charity. And they watched happily as the postage equipment was unplugged and packed up on our last day.

I have no idea what happened to the picture after we moved. There was no need for us to keep it, really. Starting over in a new space, when probably half of us didn't even know Frank, it didn't seem sensible. It might have been discarded. Was that disrespectful? Perhaps it was tucked away in our new mailroom as an homage. But that's doubtful.

What I wonder even more, though, is what happened to Frank's drawing of the American flag, with its caption: "Hello, remember me?" ■