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Bereavement

Suggested Protocol

Q: My co-worker's sister recently passed away. No one at work knew her and we were uncertain about attending any services. What protocol would you suggest in this scenario?

A: This can be an uncomfortable situation. No policy and procedures manual will give you the guidelines. This one comes from the heart.

If you work with the bereaved or know them well, consider attending the visitation and possibly the funeral as well. You will show your colleague that you care about them and are sympathetic to their loss. No one likes attending visitations or funerals. It's something we do because it says "I'm here for you".

Attend the visitation with another co-worker if it makes you more comfortable. Just remember how much harder it is for the bereaved. Be prepared. Know what to say and what not say:

Avoid making the following statements.

He's in a better place now.

To the one who has lost a loved one, there is no better place than with them, in their arms.

At least she's not suffering any more.

True, they're no longer suffering but they're not here.

God needed him more than we do.

To the bereaved, their need for their loved one can't be measured.

Heaven has another angel.

Again, this may be true, but your co-worker may be thinking that Heaven could have waited just a bit longer. They need the person too. Also, be cautious of religious expressions unless you are certain of their beliefs.

Call me if you need anything.

We say this with complete sincerity. But will the person call you? We doubt that. Instead, tell them you will call them on a specific date and then do so. After the funeral, life goes on as normal for everyone else except the bereaved. Stay in touch.

If you will be attending any service or observance of a death that differs from your own faith and customs, do a little

homework. A quick internet search can give you some useful dos and don'ts. Don't be afraid to ask someone of the same faith what you should do. If you are unable to do any of these, then follow the lead of other attendees. You can't go wrong with a warm smile, a hand and a sincere "I am so sorry."

When your colleague returns to work, acknowledge their loss even if you don't know them very well. It's the polite and thoughtful thing to do. If they wish to talk about their loved one, listen. Take your cue from them.

Attending visitations and funerals of the loved ones of co-workers is not something that can be dictated by office policy. Attend if you feel you want to show your support. You will be amazed at the impact your presence may have.

Suzanne Nourse is Founder & Director of The Protocol School of Ottawa and co-author of "The Power of Civility".

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Suzanne Nourse will be presenting on:
The Annoying Co-worker – Civility in the Workplace
at IPM's Toronto May 7 - 2014 Conference.

For details, go to www.workplace.ca (CLICK ON EVENTS).

