

Facebook introduces 20 days of bereavement leave: What's your business plan for supporting grieving staff?

EMMA KOEHN / Friday, February 10 2017

Grief Sheryl Sandberg Facebook



Source: AP Photo/Keystone, Laurent Gillieron

Facebook's bereavement and carer leave policies have prompted calls from workplace health experts for Australian businesses to focus on simple measures to address grief in the workplace.

At the start of the week the tech giant's chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg outlined new entitlements for the company's workers, including 20 days of paid bereavement leave to grieve an immediate family member, 10 days leave upon the death of an extended family member, and up to six weeks' leave to care for a sick relative.

Sandberg, whose husband Dave Goldberg passed away in 2015, said staff members shouldn't have to make trade-offs when it comes to work and family, and she spoke of the importance of a flexible workplace for a strong company and broader economy.

"Aid the nightmare of Dave's death when my kids needed me more than ever, I was grateful every day to work for a company that provides bereavement leave and flexibility. I needed both to start my recovery," she said in a post on Facebook.

The approach builds upon the social media giant's comprehensive parental leave policy, at a time when marquee tech names are making leave entitlements a key priority.

Last week craft marketplace Etsy reviewed the initial take up of its gender-neutral 26-week parental leave scheme, available to employees within a two-year period of a birth or adoption. It found the scheme had so far been taken up by men and women in equal numbers, and boasted that one third of the employees that took leave had actually been promoted since, highlighting the positive impacts of the policy.

Connecting with staff crucial, even in smallest firms

Australia would benefit from having a broader conversation about approaches to bereavement in the workplace, says director of workplace issues think tank Reventure, Lindsay McMillan.

"I'm very impressed with Facebook's intent here—simply because it recognises that as employees at work, we are whole-of-life people. [Facebook's policies are] integrated from birth until death," he tells *SmartCompany*.

"We know that Australian workers are under immense pressure to deliver on results," says McMillan, who believes a recognition of the longer term impacts of grief on staff members can help staff loyalty.

He says approaches to understand and recognising grief don't have to be complicated.

"There are some simple things, like the recognition that people need downtime at work after the death of an immediate family member," he says.

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"Or simply encouraging a person, when they are at work, to get up and go for a walk around the block, to simply be reflective of what they're going through."

While small business owners can't compete with the resources of multinational corporations, adopting a mindset that respects employees' challenges and personal lives can mean a stronger and more stable team, say experts.

However, simply having the policies for things like bereavement leave in place is not enough to ensure the benefits, says Andrew Douglas, national head of the workplace relations team at law firm MacPherson Kelly.

"The Facebook angle is one that has been driven through banks, large insurers. There is no connection between the leave you provide and the number of leave people take," Douglas tells *SmartCompany*.

"The reason people come to work is they feel their work is valued."

If workplaces can create a culture where staff communicate with each other and feel their needs are understood, there will be immediate benefits no matter the size of the company, Douglas says.

"Every single time it's done well, no matter what size, it's rewarded by profits," he says.

However, business owners that are questioning whether their resources can extend to allowing their staff more flexibility around leave in serious circumstances should understand their businesses are in risky territory, Douglas says.

"Lots of businesses run with no working capital, bare bones employees and small margins. They can never grow, they cannot invest in people. Your greatest capital risk is people," he advises.

Head of recruitment firm Nine2Three Kathryn MacMillan told [SmartCompany](#) last September that having conversations with staff about their individual needs leads to longer term efficiency.

"You have to create a buy-in from workers in your business," MacMillan said.

"We've done a number of things on this that doesn't necessarily break the bank. We have certain days where everyone has to be in the office 9-5 for instance, and then can offer more flexibility on other days."

Douglas agrees that the real power of leave policies is based not just off policies, but how your team discusses them together.

"The main thing that comes out of the work I do is engage with your employees and genuinely listen to them," he says.

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