



## Pain Management

*When personal troubles make themselves felt in the workplace, managers face one of their toughest tests.*

**by Dianne Argyris**

BEFORE THE 1990 PASSAGE OF THE AMERICANS with Disability Act (ADA), life and work used to fit neatly into separate compartments. Personal troubles such as addiction, mental illnesses, or family crises weren't considered appropriate—or safe—topics for workplace discussion. But legal protections and the increasing emphasis in the United States on what's often called work/life balance have encouraged a new openness. Although in many ways a salutary development, that new openness has also thrust employees and their managers into uncharted territory. They're learning on the fly to negotiate the effect on the workplace of life's "exceptional events," those profound occur-

rences that blur the boundaries between personal life and work.

Exceptional events are not just a new challenge for managers, they are a test of leadership, with potentially profound consequences for the employee affected as well as for the companies where they work. Handled well, they can strengthen the bonds between employee and employer, improve retention rates and staff morale, and even boost productivity. Handled poorly, exceptional events can disrupt entire workplaces, damage lives and corporate reputations, and subject companies to legal liability. Because exceptional events are as inevitable as they are unusual, managers need to prepare for them.

How to prepare? The current literature offers plenty of advice. According to the law and the human-resources handbooks, managers should be conversant with the details of ADA, FMLA (the Family and Medical Leave Act), HIPAA (national standards to protect the privacy of personal health information), and a whole alphabet soup of laws besides. They should have policies and programs in place for every contingency. They must be compassionate but firm about performance. They must be ready to follow the employee's lead on confidentiality at all costs. All of which sounds good on paper. But what happens when a gravely ill employee asks to be excused from the office several afternoons a week for treatments during the final beta test of a software product? What happens when an employee whose performance is slipping discloses he has bipolar disorder?

Policies and procedures can be of enormous help in the management of such dilemmas. But when managers talk about exceptional events, they don't talk about structural, by-the-book solutions. Instead, they describe the day-to-day decisions that often seem trivial but can have a significant effect on the well-being of employees in crisis, their co-workers, and the companies they work for.

I have conducted scores of interviews with managers who have been challenged by exceptional events. They agonized over the tough choices facing them: how to balance the needs of the employee with those of the business? How to support without intruding? What should be private? And how to talk with other employees whose work will be affected?

The following cases show how some managers answered those questions. Not every case ends well or was handled perfectly, but a few common themes emerge that may help guide other managers. Two notes: 1) The stories in this article involve employees who were solid performers, at least before their exceptional events. The element of poor performance radically complicates a manager's choices in handling an exceptional event and deserves a discussion all its own. 2) In the interest of privacy, personal and company names

and some identifying details have been changed.

### Rallying Around Laura

One Saturday afternoon, Allan, the human resources chief of Catalina Press, a custom publisher, received a call from Christine, a line manager at the company. One of Christine's employees, Laura, had been seriously injured in a car accident. Laura's fiancé, who had been in the car with her, was dead—just weeks before their planned wedding.

After absorbing the shock, Allan and Christine knew they needed to establish a preliminary plan for dealing with the tragedy. Allan encouraged Christine to contact Laura and assure her that the company stood ready to help her in any way possible. Until Laura was ready to return to work she was not to worry about anything but her recovery.

Allan and Christine then turned their attention to practical matters. Laura was going to be out for an indefinite period. How was her workload going to be parceled out? How was Christine going to break the news to Laura's co-workers? And how would they handle it?

They handled it like troupers, as it turns out. One team member volunteered to complete a project of Laura's that was nearing completion. Another volunteered to fill in for her at a conference the next weekend in Atlanta.

After Laura left the hospital, she sent an e-mail to Allan inquiring about her options. He reiterated that the company was prepared to assist her in any way possible. Then he spelled out the company's disability policy and urged her to take as much time as she needed to make up her mind. "I think just leaving it like that was hugely important," Allan says. "In a couple of days she called and asked to go out on short-term disability, which for us was 90 days."

Before the 90-day period was over, Laura called Christine to say she'd like to come back to work part time. Christine and Allan left it to Laura to determine

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how many days she would work and how soon she would resume a full-time schedule. Christine knew her group was nervous about Laura's return. Some didn't know how to acknowledge her loss. They didn't want to bring up a painful subject, but they also didn't want to hurt her by appearing callous. Allan talked with Christine's group about the options they had in their interactions with Laura. "When something bad happens, people often want to reach out, but they say nothing," he told them. "The worst thing that could happen would be for Laura to feel that no one was talking to her. What I've learned over the years is that it will make a huge difference to Laura if you just say something. It doesn't matter what you say, it's just the fact that you say something."

Allan's advice was spot on. "Everyone was so sweet," Laura said later. "It was a terrible time, and the company and everyone I work with gave me nothing but support. When I think about that, I'm just so grateful I work for a company like Catalina." She was back at work full time in less than 60 days.

### From Frank to Frances

Exceptional events are by their nature both private and public. That was certainly the case with Frank, a help-desk employee at a midsize technology company. One day Frank entered the office of Eileen, his HR manager, and closed the door. "Eileen," he said, "I've decided to undergo gender reassignment." He wanted to know whether his health insurance would cover his medical costs, but he was equally concerned about the effect on his job and his relationships with his co-workers.

Frank and Eileen sat down with Frank's manager, Louise, who was surprised but supportive. Frank was a solid

performer, someone Louise wanted to retain. But they needed a plan. Who would be told? When? Who would break the news, and how? They decided that Frank's group of immediate co-workers would be informed well in advance, so that they would understand the physical changes they would see in him and have time to get used to the transformation—and to calling him Frances, his new name. Eileen and Louise would communicate with their respective bosses, and Frank would decide whom else to tell and how and when to tell them.

Next, they identified issues that had the potential to create discord and discomfort. One key question: Which bathroom would Frank use? They talked about whether Frank would be present when his work group was informed, and they agreed that people would speak more freely and comfortably in his absence.

Eileen describes the meeting: "I sat down with my group and said, 'I've got some significant news about Frank. He's fine, but he's going to go through gender reassignment—a sex change. I know this isn't something that we deal with every day, and I want to talk about how to make this work for all of us.' I told them that this would play out over a fairly long period of time, and that right now we were assuming Frank would not have to take any extended absences."

The group members' reactions varied widely. "Most people responded with concern for Frank and decided to accept his news without criticism," says Eileen. "But some people pushed back in their chairs a bit. One person started to get a little bit, I wouldn't say hostile, but a bit demeaning. And another person, a middle-aged white male, said he didn't think the negativity was really reflective of the spirit of acceptance the company strives for. It was

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*“The first responsibility of the leader is to define reality.” —Max DuPre*

interesting, because the gentleman who spoke up in defense of Frank was not someone I would have necessarily expected to do that.”

Frank’s case is exceptional, but even when the changes are less extreme, people can see perfectly well that, as the expression has it, “there’s an elephant in the living room.” And that confronts leaders with a crucial test. How can they respect an employee’s privacy without denying the presence of the elephant? The answer varies with each case, but one thing is certain: employees watch the leader for cues, and what they observe strongly colors their views of the leader and the organization. “In this company,” Eileen says, “the culture

screen but not seeing what was in front of her. You’d talk with her and she wouldn’t respond.”

When Lila’s clients began to complain about a lack of service, Dave had to confront Lila about her work. Such conversations are difficult in any event, but especially so in Lila’s case. When she had a good day, he would praise her, but often her subsequent performance would deteriorate rapidly. Then he would have to tell her that her clients were complaining, and she would grow defensive. “I tried,” says Dave, “to be supportive and yet also recognize that accountability doesn’t go away. Trying to deal with that day to day was very, very difficult.”

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of toleration and inclusion was already in place. Other organizations couldn’t support something like what we did, and we might have had to take a different tack. We might have introduced Frances into another work group or created a new place for her. We might have discussed whether she needed to leave the organization and arranged a severance package.”

In Frances’s case, she was reintegrated into the work group without significant disruption. Such an outcome would not have been possible without candid discussion and a supportive culture.

### The Decline of Lila

Sometimes, even when managers go well beyond the call of duty, they still feel they should have done more, as the story of Dave and Lila illustrates. Lila, a longtime top performer at a defense manufacturer, took a short-term leave after a member of her family died suddenly. Upon her return, she began to behave erratically. “One day it would be the Lila I always knew, and the next day I hardly recognized her,” says Dave, her manager. “And then came the suicide attempt.”

When Lila returned to work two months later, her behavior was still problematic. “She’d be sitting at her desk,” Dave recalls, “just looking at her computer

Lila’s troubles began to affect the performance and morale of her work group. “We were just getting done what we needed to get done to survive,” says Dave. “Meanwhile, her behavior was getting worse and worse. She would sit at her desk and cry all day. The rest of my team was handling the work but feeling stressed about how to cope with her.”

Dave was torn. “I wanted to believe she was going to get better. And I felt loyal to her.” But after 12 months, Lila’s behavior and performance were still spiraling downward. Dave knew he had let the problem go on long enough—probably too long. He had to act decisively. He offered Lila a choice: she could take a long-term disability or go on probation. The memory of that conversation still pains him. “This person’s life is already destroyed,” he says, “and now I’m just complicating it even further.” With Lila’s permission, Dave had discussed her case with her doctor. “I talked with him at length,” he says, “and I knew that I could do so much more for her if she went out on disability leave.” Lila ultimately took the leave. She struggled with depression for the next five years and at the time of this writing is trying to reenter the work force.

Today, Dave wonders what he could have done differently. “If I knew then what I know now,” he says, “I would have sat

down with her right after I started seeing a pattern of erratic behavior. We should have recognized it and talked about it and put together a plan to deal with it instead of letting it go on so long and just hoping it’d get better. I think it would have made the whole thing easier for everyone.”

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Each exceptional event is, by definition, unique. Nonetheless, the managers I interviewed offered strikingly similar lessons learned.

**Inform, involve, include.** The effect of an exceptional event is never confined to one employee. Co-workers inevitably feel the blow, too. Fortunately, most people want to help. Don’t try to manage the crisis alone—or worse, try to deny that a crisis exists. Stop, give yourself time to acknowledge what has happened, and time to build a strategy to deal with it. Give your people the information they need—while respecting privacy constraints—and tap their collective energy, wisdom, and compassion.

**Be flexible about boundaries.** When describing their experiences, managers acknowledge that it is sometimes necessary and desirable to form deep emotional attachments with their employees. They say it is critical to keep paying attention and be ready to shift focus quickly. Exceptional events have both emotional and operational repercussions. The work of the group may suffer if managers deal with only the emotional effects. But managers risk alienating their employees if they assess the event only in work-related terms. Make room for both sets of concerns.

**Let your values be your guide.** Every exceptional event is a test of leadership. To find clarity amid ambiguity, managers need to consult their own values and those of their organizations. When those values are congruent, managers can take some comfort from the knowledge that, even if the outcome of their decisions is less than optimal, they can look into the mirror every morning, knowing they tried to do the right thing. ■

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