

CANCER CONVERSATIONS AT WORK

A GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS

By Helen Carter

CEO of Cancer Society Waikato/Bay of Plenty



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RESPONDING TO A DIAGNOSIS

When a person discloses a cancer diagnosis to their employer for the first time, it usually comes as a huge shock but is also an opportunity to set the tone for the journey ahead. While there isn't a script for this undeniably difficult conversation, below are a few things to stay mindful of.

Press pause

It pays to pause and remember that someone with a new cancer diagnosis is grappling with their own mortality - this is huge. Some will already be anxious at this stage about losing their livelihoods and/or becoming a burden to their colleagues. Your response in this moment doesn't need to be over-engineered, it just needs to be human and say, 'we've got you'.

Allow the person time to process the news

Let them take the lead in terms of how they want to show up, or not, in those first few days. While work is often a helpful distraction, a way of holding onto normalcy, for some it's simply too much. Others won't realise this at first and will make a brave attempt at keeping up appearances but keep a watchful eye.

Get clarity

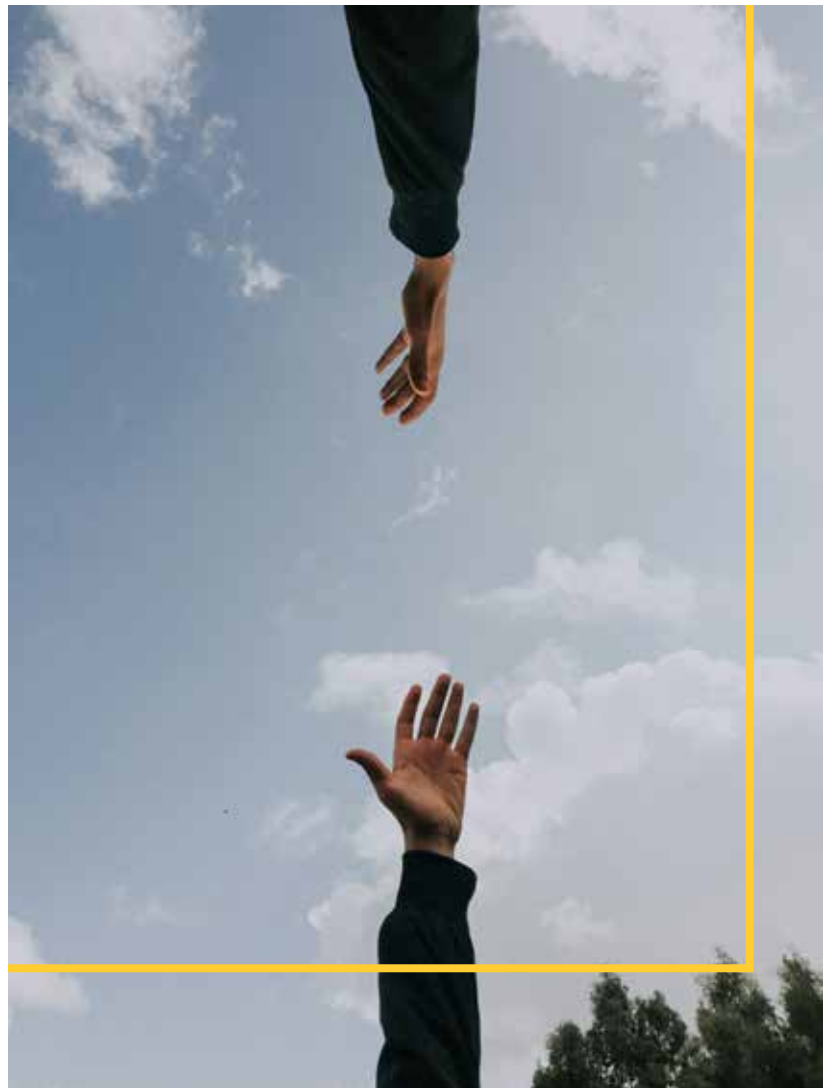
It's also important to get clarity about how much, if anything, they want to tell the wider team and expect they may change their mind about this in the weeks and months that follow.

Avoid asking details about treatments and timeframes

The journey is rarely straightforward and while your prerogative is business continuity, they won't be able to provide certainty about their absence in the months ahead. Demonstrate you can handle this uncertainty, as uncomfortable and inconvenient as it might be.

Show up

Show up, and keep showing up, as the unflappable boss - a steady hand who they can trust and keep the communication lines open.





0.2

SUPPORT DURING TREATMENT

What type of communication and how much?

In many workplaces communication funnels through a colleague with whom they have the closest friendship. Ask ahead of treatment what works best for them. There might be a support person at home who they would prefer to communicate on their behalf during treatment.

Keep note of milestones

When invasive forms of treatment begin, keep a note of milestones, be it the first, 10th or final day of chemotherapy or radiation and consider checking in with a text either directly or via their support person. Most people we talk to at the Cancer Society describe the extreme isolation they feel when they're at home or hospital for extended periods undergoing or recovering from treatment. Find ways to reach out and stay in touch, while always asking permission first.

How are they being supported at home?

Keep tabs on the support they are getting at home and find ways to help in practical yet unintrusive ways. There's a time and a place for a hamper and a meal delivery service and it's probably not when the nausea from treatment is out of control.

Be mindful of the rumour mill

Remember, your discretion is critical. Just because colleagues want to help – and they will - doesn't entitle them to personal information that somebody isn't comfortable disclosing.

Do the HR and administrative planning privately

Make sure you check in before making any moves to reallocate work or reassign direct reports. Any attempts to be proactive and alleviate stress without consultation, while well-meaning, may backfire.

Don't try to offer expert advice

Keep in mind the months after a cancer diagnosis can be stressful - the health system is a complex beast, especially when it comes to cancer. Don't try to offer expert advice but remember there are organisations well placed to do this. The Cancer Society provides a raft of free support people can tap into at any stage of their cancer journey, including counselling.

Expect the unexpected

You'll likely see glimpses of overwhelm interspersed with flashes of steely resolve over the coming months. It's a rollercoaster and feelings will likely oscillate, wildly.

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RETURNING TO WORK

There are lots of invisible ways a person who has undergone cancer treatment may struggle when they return to the office despite putting on a brave face. They may not lose their hair, but they may have numbness in their hands and feet and have trouble with fine motor skills. They might plunge into periods of extreme fatigue, brain fog, headaches or nausea.

Make it safe

Make it safe for your staff member to tell you how they are going and make it easy to accommodate their ongoing needs.

Talk openly about workload expectations

Talk openly about workload expectations and remember the mental health rollercoaster is still very much in motion.

With cancer diagnoses rising at an alarming rate, it's important leaders are prepared for these sorts of conversations in the workplace and know they are test of leadership at a very human level. I encourage you to lean into them in the most human way you can, creating a culture of kindness and setting a precedent many more will benefit from, something you can be truly proud of when you reflect on your leadership journey.

Helen Carter

CEO of Cancer Society Waikato/Bay of Plenty



Find out more about support the Cancer Society Waikato/Bay of Plenty provides:
<http://www.cancer.org.nz/how-we-can-help/support-we-offer/>