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The Modern HR Leader's Guide to Leave That Works



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INTRODUCTION

A New Era of Leave: Why This Playbook Matters

Leave isn't just a break from work...it's a defining moment in the employee experience.

In today's workplace, how organizations handle leave can be the difference between building trust or breaking it, retaining top talent or watching them walk away. Yet too often, leave is still treated like an administrative task: fill out a form, check a box, move on to the next item of the day.

That old approach no longer works.

Because behind every leave request is a real person navigating a major life event. Whether it's welcoming a child, caring for a loved one, or facing illness or loss, these are high-stakes moments. How an organization responds matters more than ever.

Unfortunately, many organizations are relying on outdated tools, scattered processes, and siloed teams. The result? HR departments are overwhelmed, managers are unprepared, and employees are left feeling uncertain, isolated, or overlooked.

But there's a better way.

This playbook is your roadmap to rethinking leave, not as a burden to manage, but as a moment to lead. Inside, you'll find:

- Clear, human-centered strategies for modernizing your leave practices
- Real-world scenarios that show how execution makes or breaks the experience
- Tools and frameworks to help managers step up with confidence and care
- Practical guidance for aligning performance and compensation fairly
- Quick wins you can implement today to start making an impact

You've been putting out fires long enough, it's time to start future-proofing your process. Because when leave is handled thoughtfully, it doesn't just support employees, it strengthens your entire organization.

Let's set a new standard for what leave management can—and should—look like.



The 3 Buckets of Leave Challenges

Understanding the real weight HR carries across policies, people, and life itself.

A leave of absence typically occurs when employees are navigating some of life's most pivotal, emotional, and often overwhelming moments. And these moments are often unexpected.

What *is* expected is for HR teams to balance this reality while ensuring compliance, continuity, and compassion all at once.

But here's the real challenge: leave management doesn't exist in a single system, department, or decision. It stretches across roles, tools, and touchpoints; many of which HR doesn't directly control.

"I think when you take a step back and look at the leave of absence space, it's so challenging for a variety of reasons," says Allison Whalen, CEO of Parentaly and parental leave expert. "I view this as three big buckets of challenges."



Compliance & Pay

The legal and financial backbone of leave

This is where most people think leave management begins and ends. But even getting this part right is harder than it looks.

In this bucket, HR is juggling:

- Federal, state, and local laws (which change frequently)
- Leave eligibility calculations
- Filing timelines and documentation
- Pay accuracy and wage replacement
- Coordination with insurance carriers and payroll providers

If anything slips through the cracks here, the risk is real: fines, audits, lost trust, and—most importantly—employees not getting paid when they need it most.

Business & Career Continuity

Keeping the wheels turning without leaving people behind

Leave isn't just a personal moment. It creates ripple effects across projects, teams, and departments.

This bucket includes:

- Workload redistribution
- Sales pipeline and client continuity
- Project handoffs and knowledge transfer
- Avoiding burnout among remaining team members
- Ensuring the employee on leave doesn't feel forgotten—or replaced

Without a plan, teams scramble. Deadlines slip. And worst of all, employees return to find their role diminished or unclear.



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Life at Home

What happens outside of the office that can effect how they work.

This is the human side of leave, the one that policies can't always account for but must acknowledge.

Think:

- Caring for a newborn or an aging parent
- Navigating a health crisis or mental health recovery
- Processing grief
- Managing household logistics with limited support

These experiences are not always visible, but they directly impact how someone shows up (or doesn't) at work.

Why This Is So Hard: Ownership Is Everywhere

One of the reasons leave feels so complex? These three buckets may be managed by different people at different times throughout the leave journey, and sometimes several people all at once. HR may lead the process, but managers, payroll, benefits admins, legal, IT, and even external vendors all play critical roles.



Allison Whalen
CEO of Parentaly

"HR can do the best job on the planet, but if your manager was awful to you or said the wrong thing or excluded you from something, it almost doesn't matter what HR did. And so this is where this gets really interesting, because all three of these buckets matter, and they're also owned by different people or many people all at once."

HR's Reality

It's the uniquely complex space HR occupies — at the intersection of legal obligations, operational pressures, and deeply personal life moments. While HR might not fully own any one bucket, they are expected to navigate all of them. They're the thread connecting disconnected systems, the voice of empathy in a world of policies, and the function held accountable when any part of the process falters. This is the weight of leave management — not just tasks or tools, but the responsibility of holding it all together, often without full control.

Leave challenges don't exist in isolation. They're interconnected, human, and deeply influential. As we continue through this playbook, we'll show you how to build practices and systems that don't just solve for one bucket, but bring all three into alignment.



Policies Alone Are No Longer Enough

How your leave process turns policies into either pain points or powerful moments of trust.

You can write a great leave policy. You can comply with every regulation. But if the experience of taking leave feels confusing, isolating, or disruptive, that policy isn't doing what you've intended.

Because when it comes to managing the leave experience, execution is everything.

It's the manager who sets the tone. It's the systems that either create calm or introduce chaos and confusion. It's the reentry into the workplace that either welcomes employees back or makes them wonder if they were missed at all.

In this section, we explore how the same policy can lead to very different outcomes depending entirely on how it's carried out.



Same Rules. Different Results.

Jessica Winder, SVP of People at CoLab, helped us bring to life three real-world leave scenarios drawn from her experiences supporting employees across industries and life stages. These stories may look familiar—not because the policies are flawed, but because execution often determines whether leave becomes a point of stress or a moment of trust.

Each scenario plays out along two distinct paths.

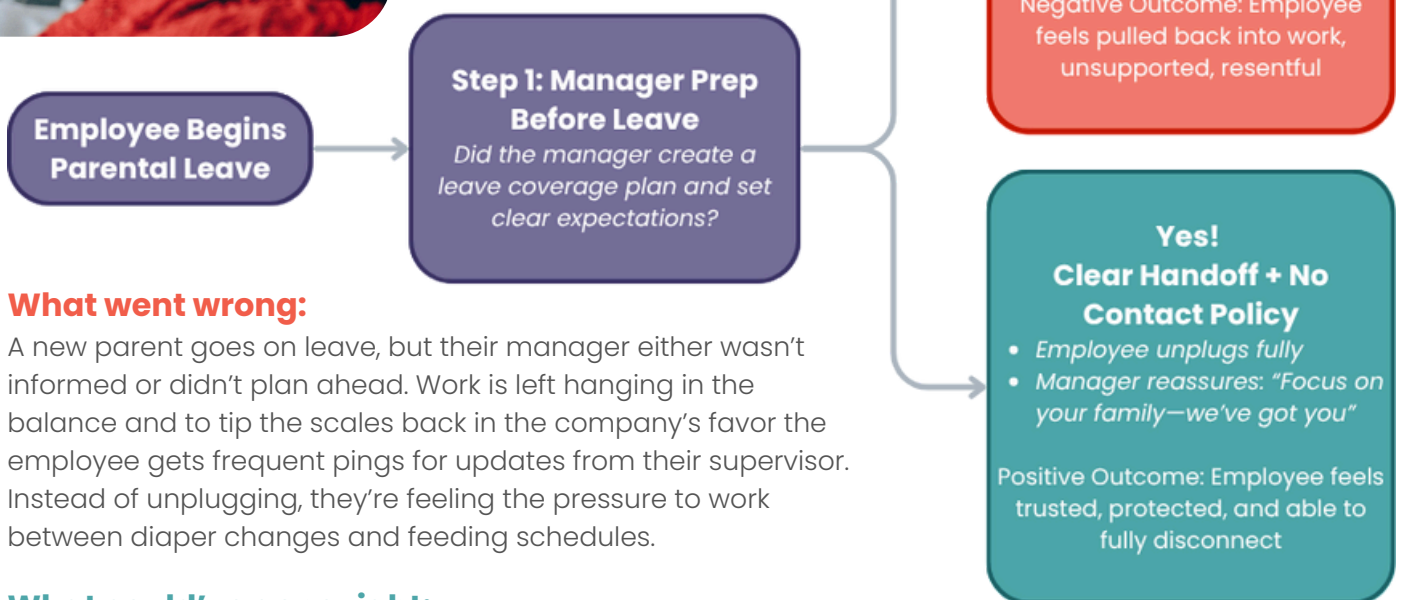
Path 1 is what happens when trust, support, and clear communication guide the leave experience.

Path 2 is what happens when they don't.



Scenario 1: The Manager Who Keeps Pinging

Jessica: Someone goes on parental leave, but their manager continuously is just checking in, or needs updates from them... that's via text message, that's via Slack, that's like can you jump on a call with me, and like you know a baby screaming in the background, - that that doesn't feel good.



What went wrong:

A new parent goes on leave, but their manager either wasn't informed or didn't plan ahead. Work is left hanging in the balance and to tip the scales back in the company's favor the employee gets frequent pings for updates from their supervisor. Instead of unplugging, they're feeling the pressure to work between diaper changes and feeding schedules.

What could've gone right:

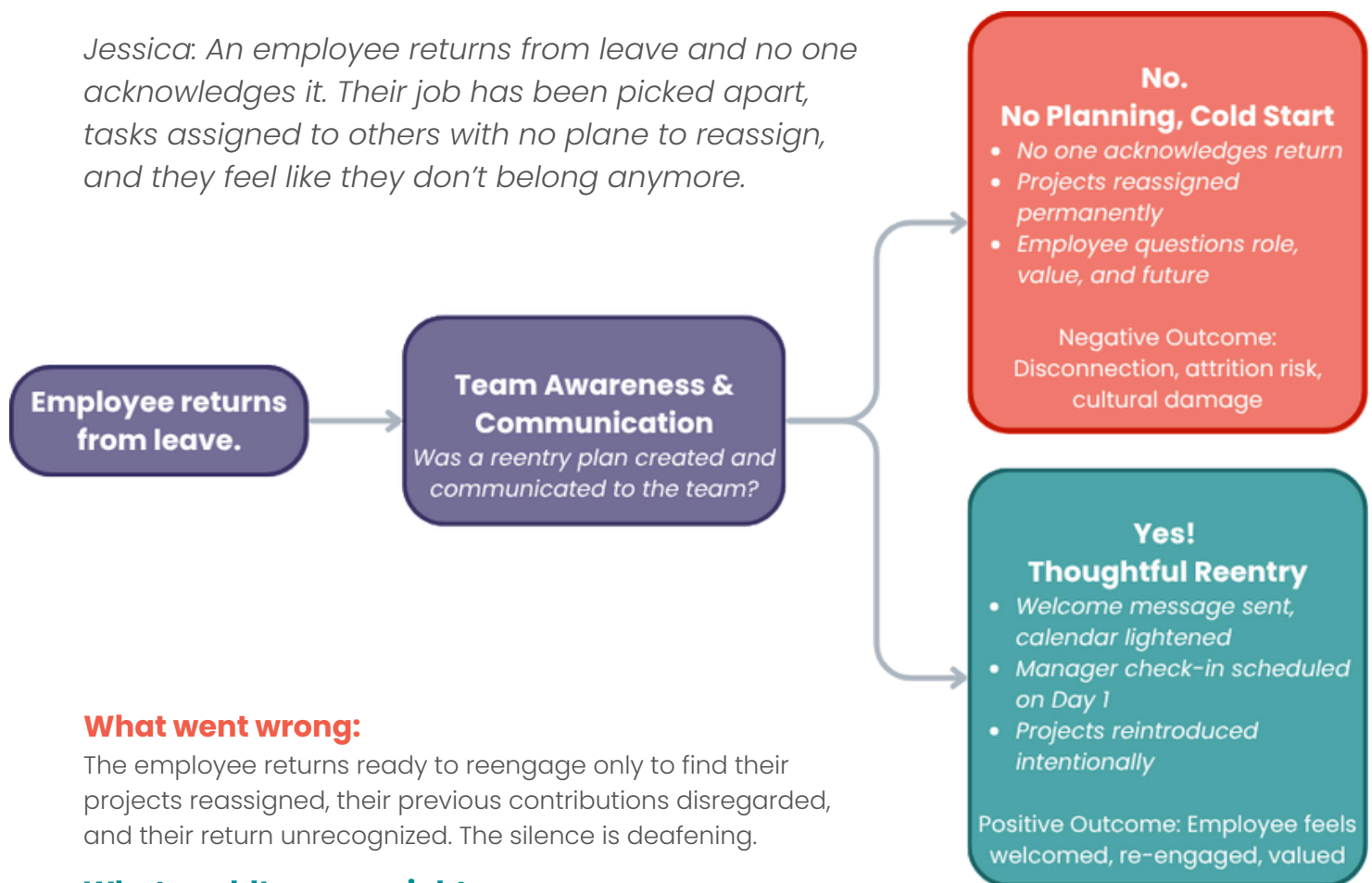
With the right preparation, education, and communication, the manager could have made it clear: "We've got this. Focus on your family." That simple shift turns leave into the restorative, supportive time it's meant to be.

Leave should be protected time. An opportunity to fully unplug, recharge, and be present where it matters most.



Scenario 2: The Welcome Back That Wasn't

Jessica: An employee returns from leave and no one acknowledges it. Their job has been picked apart, tasks assigned to others with no plan to reassign, and they feel like they don't belong anymore.



What went wrong:

The employee returns ready to reengage only to find their projects reassigned, their previous contributions disregarded, and their return unrecognized. The silence is deafening.

What could've gone right:

A simple "Welcome back! We're glad you're here and let us know what you need," can do wonders. A thought-out reentry plan clearly communicated to the employee reduces ambiguity and uncertainty. Brief manager check-ins at agreed-upon intervals to discuss existing and future projects keeps employees from feeling overwhelmed or lost in the shuffle.

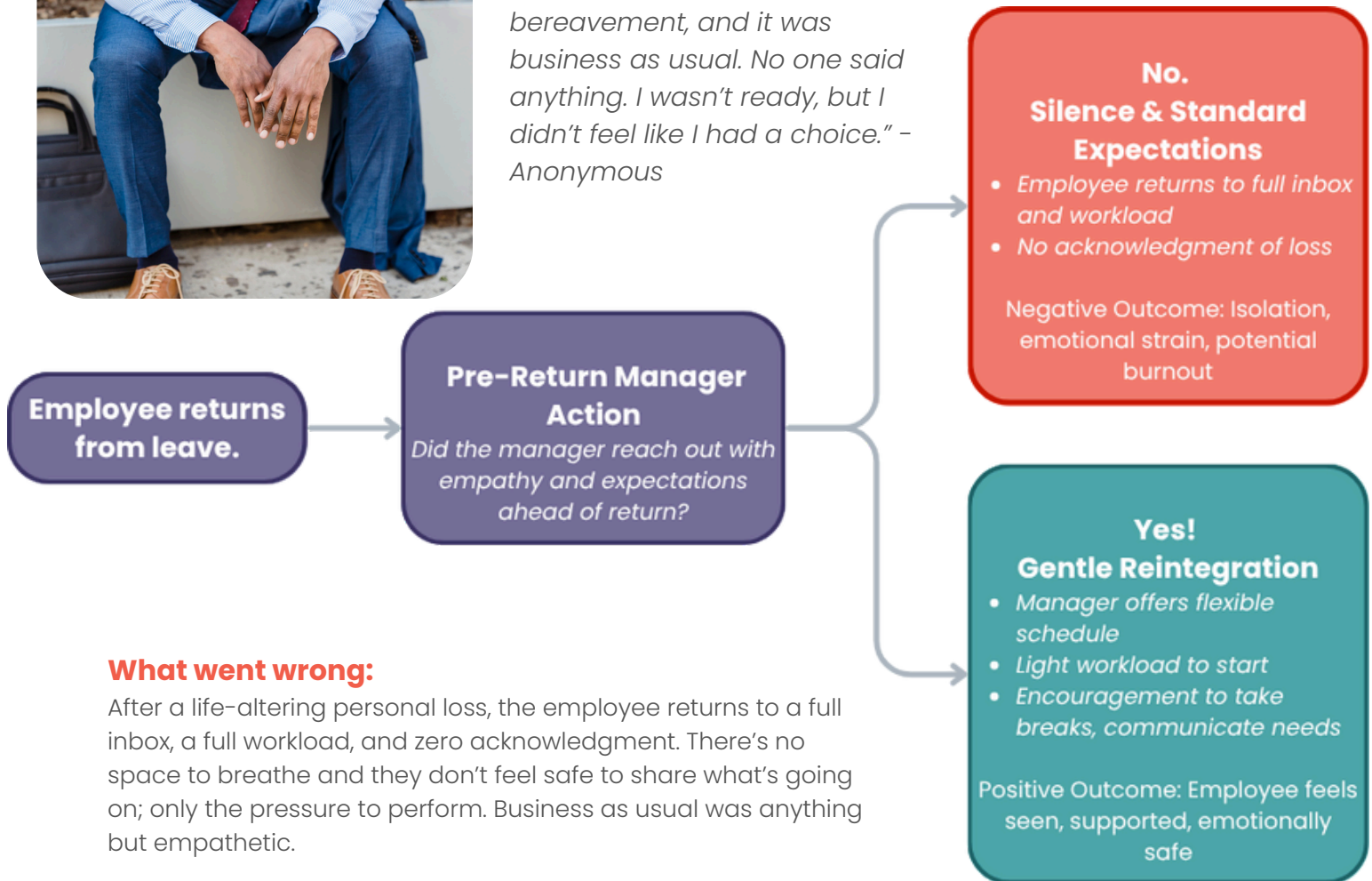
These small moments make all the difference in feeling valued and seen.

Coming back from leave shouldn't feel like starting over...it should feel like coming home.



Scenario 3: The Grieving Employee Who Disappeared

Jessica: "I came back from bereavement, and it was business as usual. No one said anything. I wasn't ready, but I didn't feel like I had a choice." – Anonymous



What went wrong:

After a life-altering personal loss, the employee returns to a full inbox, a full workload, and zero acknowledgment. There's no space to breathe and they don't feel safe to share what's going on; only the pressure to perform. Business as usual was anything but empathetic.

What could've gone right:

A short message before they return: "Take this week to ease back in. We're here when you're ready. If you need more time to get back into the swing of things, just ask." A calendar with a lighter workload and reduced meetings. Permission to not be okay and a safe space to share where they're at mentally if they so desire.

Grief doesn't end when the leave policy does. Support shouldn't end either.

The Bottom Line

A policy might define what leave is, but how it's executed defines how it feels.

When leave is handled with clarity, consistency, and care, it becomes more than a benefit to your employees. It becomes an unwavering demonstration of support for your people when they need it most. That's what builds trust because that's the human thing to do.

That's the bar HR leaders are trying to set.

That's the new standard for leave.



Performance & Compensation: Planning for Fairness

Helping people leaders go from uncertain to confident with the tools and guidance to support leave the right way

Leaves of absence shouldn't stall careers, yet without intention and planning, they often do. This is especially true during critical career moments like performance reviews and compensation adjustment decisions. The result can be a career quietly derailed, not from poor performance, but from absence during key evaluation periods.

Jessica Winder, put it plainly:

"When I first had my daughters...I didn't know a single person that had gone on leave and came back...and ran an entire department. So that was something that I was hyper-aware of...I was absolutely terrified, like what is going to happen?"

The anxiety is warranted. In the absence of structure, employees who take leave risk being overlooked during reviews or unfairly judged due to gaps in time rather than quality of work.

In sales roles or other variable compensation structures, unclear policies can even push people to skip leave altogether, sacrificing rest and recovery out of fear it will cost them financially or professionally.

That uncertainty alone can be enough for resentment to fester and bias, both conscious and unconscious, only compounds the problem.

As Allison explained:

“There is a real motherhood bias and fatherhood bonus that research shows exist...And what's so fascinating to me is how often I see that companies have not even established a company policy for what happens if employees are gone on their leave of absence or their parental leave specifically during the performance review process.”



Jessica Winder
SVP of People, CoLab

“You have to explicitly teach managers, how they should evaluate someone if they've been gone six months out of the 12 month period. Because managers, sometimes they may not be ill-intentioned, but they may rate them lower because they're like, I don't know. They were here 50% of the time, right?”

Fairness starts with intentional planning. Allison continued:

“There are some really easy ways to address this. Number one, you can encourage people to draft their self-reviews before they go on leave and ask their peers to draft their peer reviews as well...You need to be really explicit about thinking only about the six months they were here, rate that quality of work.”

By documenting contributions before leave and training managers on how to assess work over the period an employee was active, not absent, organizations can reduce bias and maintain transparency.

Just as importantly, compensation decisions should follow clearly defined, written guidelines that anticipate how leave will be handled, especially for bonus-eligible roles.

Without these steps, employees are left to guess how leave will affect their standing. With them, they can confidently step away from work knowing their career will still be on track when they return.

Making Leave Part of the Process

Leaves of absence can complicate evaluation and compensation if there's no framework in place. This side-by-side view outlines typical pitfalls and practical steps that help ensure fairness.

Situation	Pitfall	Process
Performance Reviews	No clear guidance for leave periods. Manager "guesses."	Pre-leave self and peer reviews focused only on time worked.
Compensation in Sales	Variable comp reduced with no standard approach.	Pre-defined plan for quotas and prorated targets.
Manager Training	No instructions for rating partially active employees.	Guidance on evaluating performance only during active months.
Employee Sentiment	"Terrified" of falling behind or being penalized.	Confident in transparent process and documented plan.

Quick Wins to Get Started Today

You don't need a massive overhaul to start making leave more humane, strategic, and fair. Small, intentional changes can have an outsized impact on the experience of employees navigating leave and the leaders supporting them.

Here are five quick wins you can implement right now:

- Train managers on how to talk about leave with empathy. Provide scripts, sample scenarios, and coaching, not just policies.
- Build a simple re-onboarding template. Help employees reenter with clarity, structure, and support.
- Revisit performance review timing and guidelines. Make sure there's a plan for how to fairly assess someone who was on leave.
- Launch a "Did You Know?" campaign. Educate employees on the leave benefits available to them. Most people don't know what they can access.
- Assign a buddy to every returning employee. Even a small gesture, like daily check-ins or coffee breaks, can go a long way.



As Justin Clifford, CEO of Bereave, shared:

"I've got actually three quick hits that have meant the world to people that we've talked to that cost very little, if anything. One, assign a buddy to somebody who is coming into the office for the first time since their leave... And we've got one company that actually sponsored a family to attend a retreat for the loss of a child... The company sponsored that."

It doesn't take much to show someone they're still valued.

Final Word: HR Can Lead the Way

If you take anything away from this playbook it's that leave can no longer be treated as just a policy, it's a defining moment in the employee experience. The way it's handled echoes long after someone returns, influencing everything from morale to retention to brand reputation.

Get it right, and you build trust, loyalty, and resilience. Get it wrong, and you risk alienating top talent when they're most vulnerable and disrupting your operations in a major way.

The good news? HR doesn't have to fix it alone, but HR can lead the way.

Let leave be the place where empathy meets strategy. Because when people feel supported during life's hardest or most joyful moments, they come back stronger, and so does your organization.



Justin Clifford
CEO, Bereave

"I've got actually three quick hits that have meant the world to people that we've talked to that cost very little, if anything. One, assign a buddy to somebody who is coming into the office for the first time since their leave... And we've got one company that actually sponsored a family to attend a retreat for the loss of a child... The company sponsored that."