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Business, Institution, and Government Agency Ethics and Etiquette of Expressing Sympathy

By Kim Stacey

When preparing an obituary, people often find it tempting to suggest that donations be made "in lieu of flowers." But even with good intentions, this suggestion limits expressions of sympathy, especially from the employer of the deceased.

Many businesses, institutions, and government agencies have regulations prohibiting monetary donations as an expression of sympathy because it may be considered unethical to support one organization and not another, or outsiders may view certain organizations as inappropriate. However, many of these same businesses have funds set aside for floral or plant tributes. Since flowers are a universally accepted gift, "flower funds" are generally set up to be used for various occasions. For example, University of Houston Victoria, like many institutions, has strict rules and regulations for expressing sympathy. "University funds may not be used for memorial contributions to given charities in lieu of flowers. If flowers are not appropriate, only a card will be sent," (UHV condolences and Congratulations Policies).

When considering how to express your sympathy, it's important to remember that flowers are always a kind gesture, unless the phrases, "omit flowers or no flowers," are used. Flowers brighten a somber mood and help the bereaved visually experience support from friends and family.

There are many reasons why leaders can and should send some form of sympathy to bereaved families.

- Most businesses, institutions, and agencies have money set aside for sympathy gifts and flowers to be sent to employees or their direct relatives, close associates, and even students, but this money is often not allowed to be used as monetary donations. University of Illinois has a strict policy. "Unallowable for any funds: In Lieu of Flowers" Contributions in lieu of flowers... [However] Allowable: acknowledgments may include flowers, plants, gift baskets, or similar items," (University of Illinois, Business and Financial Policies and Procedures). All institutions have a policy regarding sympathy gifts and flowers and one should be diligent in knowing their company's policy before sending an expression of sympathy.
- Employees and other continuous supporters of a business or agency put in a tremendous amount of effort into their professional life. By sending an expression of sympathy, such as flowers, employers acknowledge the dedication of the employee and their family. Making a gesture of kindness shows the relationship of mutual support between employee and employer.
- By acknowledging the difficult loss of someone who has impacted the business or institution, a leader is able to express to the employee or associate that they are valued and will be supported when they return to work.



- Supporting employees and/or their families is always good business. By showing support and care for people who have been dedicated to the company the company builds a reputation of having strong values. People always remember the support they are given and will meet that support when they are called upon in the future.

If you have decided to send some form of sympathy other than a monetary donation to a bereaved associate and/or their family who has used the words "in lieu of flowers" it's important to remember that there is the option to send flowers. A family who has used that phrase may be disappointed to find that there are no flowers at the services. Your colorful addition, however extravagant or modest, may be the only arrangement there. Your supportive effort will be much appreciated.

When representing a business, institution, or government agency, is very important to know sympathy etiquette and how to express sympathy to your employee and their family.

- Flowers and sympathy plants are usually sent to the funeral home or site of services once the news of the loss is announced. They should arrive prior to viewing and visitation or services. When sending flowers to a church or denominational affiliate, it's important to remember you are not supporting the denomination, but the individual you know. If this is still of question, sending sympathy gifts, flowers, and cards directly to the bereaved's home is acceptable. Also, if for some reason the flowers will be late arriving to the services, always send them directly to the bereaved's home so as not to disrupt services.
- If you wish to include the company logo with the gift or flowers be very discreet. The logo, if included at all, should only be small on the card. If individuals or leaders from the company or agency wish to send their own sympathy expression they are free to do so, but one expression, such as flowers should be made from the company as a whole.
- In today's world we are privileged to live in a diverse society, however this can make it difficult to know what is an appropriate form of sympathy. For example some religions and cultures only accept certain colors of flowers, while others accept only food. Know the individual you are sending sympathy to. When there is still a question of what to send, check with the funeral home or local florist as they usually have a list of what the family is accepting.

Hard times come upon all of us. It is the support and care we while we endured that we remember. While it may be a challenge to know what to say or do for a bereaved family, it is important to remember that all gestures of kindness help to ease mourning and increase feelings of security. As a leader or representative of a business, institution, or government agency, you know there is a mutual respect and support between an employee and their family and the institution. It is your responsibility to show that they'll be supported while they mourn and when they return to work.

Resources

How to Express Sympathy

http://www.ehow.com/how_2239763_express-sympathy.html

<http://www.isnare.com/?aid=80336&ca=Death>

The Importance of Flowers in Mourning

<http://www.inlieuofflowers.info/index.php?s=2>

<http://ezinearticles.com/?The-Importance-Of-Sympathy-Flowers&id=786702>

Different Religious Traditions

<http://entertaining.about.com/cs/etiquette/a/funeraletiquett.htm>

<http://www.ifishoulddie.co.uk/religious-traditions-and-beliefs-c37.html>

University Policies

University of Houston Victoria - Condolences and Congratulations Policies. <http://www.uhv.edu/fin/policy/a/a-28.htm>

University of Illinois - Business and Financial Policies and Procedures, SECTION 8.13 - Allowability and Funding of Certain Expenditures. http://www.obfs.uillinois.edu/manual/central_p/sec8-13.html

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