

Supporting Employees Affected by Layoffs and Terminations: Recommendations for Managers

In light of the recent notification of layoffs or terminations affecting your staff and workplace, you may observe your employees reacting in various ways. These reactions will depend on the scale of the job loss and the number of employees or teams that have been impacted.

Immediate Reactions by the Terminated Employees

Employees directly impacted by job loss may exhibit a range of possible reactions. For those employees who are surprised by these developments, the most common emotional reaction may be some degree of shock, disbelief and disappointment. Most terminated employees will experience some degree of numbness and many will wish to withdraw as soon as possible from the termination meeting. A smaller percentage of employees may display some anger and anxiety but the vast majority will manage this difficult time with professionalism. Some employees may appear more accepting of the change while others may even appear relieved and welcome the ability to move in a different direction with their career. Reactions can vary depending on the conditions of the restructuring, the age and life-stage of those directly impacted, current life stressors (including financial), how the announcement was made and their respective financial compensation.

Immediate Reactions of Survivors

Those employees who are not directly impacted by the job loss but are impacted by the loss of friends and colleagues can react in a number of ways. Survivors will often experience similar feelings of disbelief and possible shock that was seen in their terminated colleagues. They may also likely exhibit what has been termed "survivor syndrome" which is a combination of reactions ranging from guilt that they retained their jobs, feelings of betrayal and anger at the organization and relief that they survived the cuts.

Reactions of survivors can also be impacted by the history of terminations/layoffs at the workplace. If these terminations were the first occasion within the company then there may be an increased sense of betrayal at what may be seen as

management breaking the "psychological contract". If there is the perception that there may be further cuts, then employees may feel anxious or worried due to job insecurity and low morale. Additional concerns of survivors will be workload, role clarification and the company's strategy moving forward.

Reactions of employees and the intensity of these reactions will be impacted by their personal circumstances and professional experiences. Reactions will vary but could include one or more of the following:

Emotions: anger; anxiety; apathy; irritability; sadness; and relief.

Physical: sleep disturbances; digestion problems; fatigue; headaches; and hyperactivity.

Cognition: confusion; daydreaming; disorganization; preoccupation; decreased memory and decision-making capability.

Behaviour: diminished morale; communication difficulties; staff may withdraw/isolate themselves; passive-aggressive behaviour; increased questioning or demands directed toward managers; some staff members may resign and leave company.

These reactions would be considered normal following layoffs or terminations.

What Can You Do?

Reactions to layoffs or terminations are strongly related to a sense of loss of control and influence over such events. Therefore, a primary consideration for managers is to provide a supportive environment in which confidence, competence and a sense of mastery can be regained. It is helpful to keep the following in mind:

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Identify any employees who are at greater risk — those who may be more impacted as a result of their direct exposure to the loss of colleagues and those that are dealing with other personal and professional stressors.

Ensure there is a proactive and ongoing plan — you cannot over communicate to the surviving employees. Use various means of team, individual and lunch meetings to reach out to surviving employees.

Acknowledge employee concerns in a respectful and non-intrusive manner.

Acknowledge some of your own concerns and reactions, balanced with need to maintain appropriate boundaries.

Recognize and acknowledge, in a non-judgmental way, that employees may have varying, unique emotions, attitudes and opinions related to this situation.

Acknowledge and normalize staff reactions.

Assist and support employees as they resume their work activities and be mindful that some employees may require increased support and perhaps training if they are in a new role.

Demonstrate a balanced approach between employee needs and workplace productivity.

Supportively and directly address any concerns about any changes in workload and roles.

Continue to monitor staff reactions and provide support as needed.

Remind employees that they each have their own unique and resourceful ways of coping.

Urge employees to reach out to colleagues, family, friends and people they feel close to.

Provide employees with clear information regarding how to access internal and external helpful resources, including the Employee and Family Assistance Program.

Avoid internalizing other's reactions; understand the factors that shape your own interpretations and response.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS FOR MANAGERS

As a manager, you have a significant role in facilitating a quicker recovery for the surviving employees. The active support of leadership in an organization has been shown to make a crucial difference in employee recovery rates.

You most likely are also feeling the impact of the termination of your own colleagues and so best to acknowledge your own reactions and take steps to take care of yourself.

As your organization's stability and success will depend on the productivity of the remaining employees, it is crucial for leaders to foster an atmosphere of care and ongoing, open communication. Research has shown that surviving employees may experience some level of relief that they still have their jobs but their possible diminished commitment and motivation after a downsizing need to be recognized and carefully managed. Employees form close relationships at work and their future engagement and attitude towards the workplace will be influenced by their perception regarding how their departing colleagues were treated. If the sense is that the termination process was handled professionally, this will go a long way to mitigating feelings of anger and resentment.

Organizational change can take its toll on managers. It can also be an opportunity to initiate positive stress and change management strategies. This can start by reviewing your own attitudes and behaviours including the possible impact of your personal reactions on others. Take good care of yourself and seek consultation and/or support, as needed. Reaching out and supporting employees at a time when you may also be affected by these events can be stressful.

Be visible and manage employee anxiety and fear by routinely checking in with employees, offering support as much as possible.

Do not hesitate to consult the Homewood Health's Crisis Management Services Team, if you require any consultation or support in assisting your employees, work teams or yourselves.

Need more assistance or support? For more information, to book a counselling session or to access Homewood Health for any additional assistance or support, contact our Client Services Centre available to you 24/7 in English and French. All calls are completely confidential.

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