

Handling Layoffs for a Triple Win



Layoffs, staff cuts, downsizing – whatever you call them – are hard on everyone.

The people being laid off, the **departees**, are absorbing a loss of livelihood and blow to the ego that carries them through all the classic phases of grief [explained in this quick video from clever Canadian change guru, Bob McCulloch], each in their own way. There's a huge temptation to apply salves such as sympathy-seeking or hostility to carry them through.

The boss overseeing the layoffs must make sure the organization isn't left in worse shape because of her decisions. Despite the stress, guilt, and awkwardness that most people experience when laying off subordinates, the boss has to clearheadedly consider long-term, unwanted side effects of her decisions today – including impact to morale and disruption to the organization.

The survivors have to make the organization keep working, or work better, despite feelings of guilt, fewer resources and significant organizational uncertainty. The temptation is to over-work or to disengage. Neither is the right path.

We've worked on and around layoff situations in all types of organizations. While there's plenty to say on this topic, we've found these tips to be useful:

For **the departees**: *be classy*. Be the kind of person you'll be proud of a year from now – and the kind of person others will be proud to know – and hire. Set a supportive, positive tone. Show your interest in the success of the organization. Proactively help transfer your critical job knowledge and working relationships to those who will have to pick up the slack when you leave.

For **the boss**: *think long term*. The crummy things leaders do to avoid short-term pain – such as making impulsive decisions, using email when communicating emotional messages, appearing impassive, and so forth – will cost you big in the long run. Move swiftly but deliberately. And your first step should be to develop the *criteria* for what positions should be cut. Surprisingly, you will get better decisions and less resistance if you *involve employees in developing the criteria* – yes, even those who may be laid off... Honest. We've tried it and it works.



For **the survivors**: *get focused*. Now is the time – both for your sake and the organization's – for you to focus on *exactly* the right things:

- What work is core to the organization's mission and strategy?
- *Of that work*, what could be done much better?

Unless you were really slacking, your best path now isn't to work harder on just anything and isn't to disengage. Make yourself valuable . . . and help ensure the success of the organization. As we commented in an earlier post, sometimes, tough, new constraints can actually open opportunities and drive exciting innovation.

