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It's Not Pretty, But it Can Be (Close to) Painless

The idea of layoffs does not conjure up a pretty picture. As the person who has to deliver the bad news, you are likely to face questions of “Why me?” perhaps tears, and a lot of uncomfortable feelings from those affected. That is the reality. People’s identities in our society are strongly connected to what they do professionally. When that identity is threatened, it creates a tough situation for everyone involved. Here, we will explore the steps to handle layoffs that will help you conduct a meeting as smoothly and painlessly as possible.

Feelings

Expect emotions to run high during the layoff meeting. “Losing one’s job is one of the top five emotional crises, along with divorce and death of a spouse or parent,” says Clay Cockrell, LCSW of Walk and Talk Therapy. “Don’t be afraid of the person’s feelings – anger or tears. Let them experience their emotions and just listen.”

Not taking a layoff “personally” just isn’t an option for most people. Because identity is so closely related to career, it can be impossible to separate the two. You are sharing life-changing news with people; you have to respect that. According to Jason Boltax, a consultant with HRAdvantage, a division of Arthur J. Gallagher, the person that delivers this news needs to listen and be empathetic during the meeting.

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Employees are likely to vent their frustrations and perhaps air “dirty laundry” about their departments or bosses. “This isn’t a time to defend the company,” says Boltax. “It is time to listen and ask yourself if there is validity in what is being said.”

Messages and Actions

With some planning and preparation, the layoff meeting can go smoothly, with no negative repercussions for the firm. The basics that all HR experts agree on in terms of delivering the news are to:

1. Set clear criteria for who is being laid off to avoid legal risks. Whether the choice is based on tenure, level, or department, be fair in your decision. Keep the meeting short and to the point. The actual message you convey should be limited to the business reasons that the person is being let go. “Do not get into the number of times they were late or how their work was not up to par,” says attorney Jason Smolen of SmolenPlevy in Washington D.C. “This way, you avoid discrimination and the appearance of discrimination.”
2. Prepare what you will say. You might even consider having a script to practice ahead of time. “Remember, this is part of your job – do it well,” says Cockrell. This is one task that tests your supervisory and management expertise. Handling it professionally

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Cost-cutting Alternatives

Even if your firm isn't facing layoffs, cost-cutting is almost always at the forefront of management's mind in economic times like these. Consider some of these options that have been implemented in New York City companies:

- Set copy machines to default to double-sided printing to save paper.
- Offer smaller or single-serve containers of milk for coffee to cut waste; eliminate free soda and food.
- Cut back on cell phone and Blackberry services / minute plans – consider who really needs what to operate effectively.
- Shut off equipment nightly to decrease electric bills.
- Give small raises to some and ask others to accept wage decreases.
- Institute salary caps and performance mandates or incentives.
- Scrutinize travel expenses and meeting locations for cost and necessity.
- Stagger work schedules and create four-day workweeks for some staff.

Getting employees on board with extreme cost-cutting techniques might be easier when they understand the cuts will actually help them keep their jobs.

What if YOU are being laid off?

As Josh Miller, an executive and personal coach, counsels his clients, a layoff affects most aspects of your life. However, it doesn't have to be a completely negative event, and following these tips can help you manage it.

- If you think you are being considered for a layoff, put together a case of why you should be kept on at the firm. Make a list of your accomplishments and how you have positively affected business and profits. Bring this information to your superior – be your own champion!
- Know your rights. Do not sign any paperwork immediately. Take it home. Review it. Ask questions. You might also take this opportunity to negotiate your severance benefits. Nothing is final until you sign off on the agreement, so use this time to your advantage.
- Ask for references. Get permission to use the comments during your search and on your LinkedIn and other social network profiles.

- After a layoff, set up a structure for your day. Schedule time to work on your resume, conduct your job search, and do the projects you have been putting off. Staying active will help fight off depression and that 'lost' feeling that affect many unemployed professionals.
- Have a grasp of your financial picture. Plan out your severance budget and set your goals accordingly.
- Your well-being is integral to your emotional health, especially during times of extreme stress. Make sure you continue (or start) to exercise, eat healthy, and get enough rest.

Then, invite yourself to look at the event as a gift and manage the situation in line with that idea – perhaps this is the perfect time to pursue another passion or go on that long awaited trip! Most of all, allow yourself to be with the entire range of emotions that come with a layoff.

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is a valuable business skill. Have all the information you need at hand – such as benefits, severance, and exit procedures – to keep the meeting on track.

3. To limit your legal exposure and decrease the emotional factor of personal relationships, consider having a second manager present or have a person that is not connected to the employee deliver the news. According to Barbara Safani, career strategist and president of Career Solvers, the bearer of bad news can be a manager from another business group or a consultant hired from an outplacement service.
4. Be physically ready for the meeting – tissues, water, and location. Safani counsels clients to think about where the meeting is taking place. Will the employee have to be paraded around the office after the meeting to collect his/her things or to go to the next meeting to learn about their benefits package? That will be uncomfortable for all parties. Also, know the protocol for after the meeting. Will the person be escorted out and their belongings sent to them? Will they have opportunity to say goodbye to colleagues and friends? Think about the little things in the process that will show you are sensitive to their needs.
5. What if you need to find out about the status of their projects? In this case you might be out of luck. Employees have no motivation to spend a lot of time going over details of their work at this point. As Boltax coaches his clients, “Managers should make this part of their day-to-day practice. Knowing what subordinates roles and responsibilities are, and having their work documented, are key in times of layoff or

other emergencies that affect employment.”

Alternative Benefit Options

For those firms that want to offer something to their departing employees, but which simply cannot commit thousands to outplacement services, there are a few lower cost options. Permitting employees to continue use of the office space or to stay on the roster can help during their job search, as most employers perceive employed candidates as more desirable. Other relatively low cost severance benefits can include an allowance toward individual providers of coaching and resume-writing services, which often cost much less than full-blown outplacement services. In addition, allowing employees to retain things like company cell phones and memberships to professional organizations can help them keep in touch with industry contacts and trends.

Change is never easy. Some view change as a fearful time, full of very intense stress and negative life-changing consequences. Others view change as an opportunity to do something bigger, better, and completely new. No matter how you view it, or how your employees view it, recognize a layoff as an event that requires extensive preparation and compassion. Delivering the news is never easy, but it only takes a minute. The hard part is on the employees that have to digest the information and make immediate changes – good or bad – to their lives. As a manager, being ready for all aspects of a layoff is an advantage for everyone; it helps you provide necessary information concisely and clearly and gives the employee a sense that this is truly a business issue, rather than something ‘personal’ against them.

Kimberly Schneiderman is the owner of City Career Services, a company that provides job search tools including Resumes, Cover Letters, Bios, and Interview Workshops to goal-oriented professionals at all levels and across all industries. Kimberly has authored numerous career-related articles and videos, and is a recognized presenter on topics such as job search strategies, goal setting strategies, and interviewing.



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