

Supporting the survivors

Decisions to reduce staff can be a harsh reality, but how do you support the team that remains?

The layoff process is difficult for everyone involved. Employees who lose their jobs can feel frightened and humiliated. Managers who deliver the news will struggle with emotions of their own.

And the process hardly comes to an end when employees remove belongings from their desks, trucks or lockers.

Once the bad news is delivered, managers are faced with the task of re-engaging the employees who remain. It is no small challenge. Those who survived the layoffs will likely face the pressure of doing more with less. They may even need to address the sense of guilt that they



feel because they still have jobs while their friends have been sent home.

The latter feeling is part of a psychological condition that has become known as Layoff Survivor Syndrome, explains Peter Forint, a Regional Vice-President with Wardell Professional Development, a consulting firm that specializes in owner-managed businesses. "The people who survive don't even know if they can talk to the people who have been laid off."

The secret to re-engaging employees and putting their minds at ease will come in the form of communication.

"As a fleet manager, it's always important to communicate with your employees, but even more so now," he says. "If there's a vacuum, people will make up their own stuff. The rumours will run rampant."

That focus on communication will involve meetings that should be quickly scheduled to tell everyone in the organization about the layoffs. Forint suggests that the content of the meeting also needs to address "the good, the bad, the ugly and the good."

The message begins by stressing the quality of the organization that the employees have created (the good), and is followed by a reference to the external economic forces that are outside of their control (the bad). Then it is a matter of addressing the fact that staff members needed to be laid off to support the long-term success and viability of the company (the ugly). In the end, the employees should be told that the painful decisions will help the fleet to ride out the challenging times that remain (the good).

A move to introduce layoffs all at once will also help to support these efforts, he adds. "It's important for people to understand that you've cut as far as you anticipate you have to. Cut deep. If you need five, let all five go at once." A series of successive cuts will simply leave remaining staff members to wonder if they will be the next economic casualties.

The overall tone of the message should express the regret about making the decision, and inform people that these individuals were not at fault.

But the communication process also needs to continue in the ensuing days and weeks to help ease rattled nerves. "We encourage our clients to share financial data on an as-needed basis," he adds, noting how information on factors such as the volume of freight can help employees see signs of economic recovery once they begin to emerge.

The layoffs may actually present advantages beyond the initial cost savings. The need to reduce staff numbers can provide an opportunity to shed people who have not performed as well as they should, and the remaining employees can actually be left with the feeling that they remain on staff because they were considered the best members of the team.

But there may also be a need to offer a clear indication of any changes in responsibilities or reporting structures. "There may be layers of management that are gone. If that layer no longer exists, do the [decision-making responsibilities]

go up or down?" Forint asks. "In general, it is better to let the responsibilities go down. You have to spread the load. If you now have three times the number of people reporting to you, you don't want to make three times the decisions."

Managers should look at the new environment as an opportunity to re-engineer a variety of internal procedures, identifying any steps that were nice to have and focusing on the steps that are vital to the business, he says.

It is a focus that will ultimately help the fleet to emerge stronger than ever once the challenging economic environment begins to recover.

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