

## **Managers Communicating Lay-offs**

Good communication is critical in the planning and implementation of layoffs. While the information you have to present is not pleasant, employees must hear it directly and honestly from management rather than from the rumor mill.

Telling employees they are going to be laid-off is not an easy task. You may experience anxiety and guilt about having to take the action. Recognize that these feelings are normal. Making sure that you treat the employee humanely and compassionately will help to make this situation more tolerable for both of you.

### **Preparation**

1. Work with Employee and Labor Relations to develop a plan on how and when to communicate to management and the staff about impending lay- offs.
2. Discuss logistical considerations, such as last day of work and the return of keys, etc.
3. Remember that you are not personally responsible for the lay-off/reduction in time. If you feel the need, ASAP is available for consultation.
4. The employee may be upset or angry. He/she may blame you. Anticipate reactions so that you can be prepared to handle them in the best possible way.

### **Tips for Talking to the Employee**

#### **Do**

- Speak to the employee in a private place
- Get right to the point
- Recognize the employee's contribution to the unit and to the University
- Briefly explain the reasons for the lay-off
- Listen to the employee and wait for a response
- Describe the assistance available through Human Resource
- Explain the importance of understanding benefits and rehire status
- Give the employee the lay-off letter
- Clarify the separation date
- Offer support and an empathetic ear; listen without being defensive
- Schedule a later meeting to discuss logistics such as returning keys
- Be available to address the employee's issues and concerns about the lay-off

#### **Don't**

- Engage in small talk
- Use humor
- Be apologetic
- Defend, justify or argue
- Threaten
- Identify others being laid off
- Try to minimize the situation
- Personalize the anger

### Reactions to Expect from Remaining Employees

Reactions you might encounter from remaining employees after the layoff action include:

- Shock/Silence
- Anger/Blame
- Frustration
- Negative attitude
- Insecurity
- Resistance to change
- Unintentional sabotage by resisting organizational change

### After the Layoff

Respond to the feelings of the remaining staff members and communicate a positive image for the future. A series of team meetings might ensure an ongoing safe place for communication.

#### **Important topics include:**

- Acknowledge that it is normal to feel anxious during these uncertain times.
- Explain the department reorganization and reorganization and redefine roles.
- Discuss any impact on workload/work flow.
- Assure staff members that no other positions will be affected at this time (if this is true) and that all employees are valued.
- Mention that ASAP services are available for any employees having difficulty with the changes.
- Maintain an open door policy so employees can come to you for guidance and support.
- Recognize that employees differ on how quickly they can adapt to change.
- Express optimism for the future.
- End on a positive note; remind staff members of their value and importance.

Here are some common reactions people might experience when they lose a job. Each person might react differently to his or her situation. The key is in how long the reactions last, how intense they are, and how much the person's daily functioning is impacted.

- Knowing the job is gone, but having difficulty believing it
  - Loss of appetite, or increased appetite
  - Feeling restless and looking for activity and finding it difficult to concentrate on and complete tasks
  - Trouble falling asleep, waking in the middle of the night, dreaming about the job or the job loss, or spending increased time sleeping
  - Feeling exhausted and lacking energy
  - Feeling depressed
  - Buying things one would not normally buy
  - Frequent changes in mood, sometimes over very small things
  - Feeling embarrassed or guilty for what was done or not done (or said or not said) prior to losing the job.
- Preoccupied with "what if..."
- Being angry or irritated at the wrong person or the wrong circumstance or at the world in general
  - Feeling angry towards those who made the decision or delivered the news of the layoff or termination
  - Anxiety about job-hunting
  - Not wanting to see former colleagues, friends, loved ones, or having difficulty initiating contact with others
  - Crying unexpectedly

While being laid-off might cause personal, financial, and family stress, it might also serve as an opportunity to create change. Research shows that a significant percentage of employees laid-off are more satisfied in their next job positions. Many take the lay-off opportunity to rethink their career goals and choices.

### Ways to Assist Employees During Layoffs

Job loss can be a very stressful experience for both employees and supervisors. Job loss due to budget cuts or reorganization can result in a period of transition for employees and as well as departments. Although many employees cope successfully with the transition process, some individuals react to the experience of job loss with emotional distress and may become temporarily overwhelmed.

**Some common reactions to job loss and the transition process include:**

- Sadness
- Anger
- Self-blame, blaming others
- Low morale
- Decreased productivity/motivation
- Stress and anxiety
- Uncertainty about the future
- Job identity crisis
- Denial, negotiation, resignation

**Some common indicators that may increase the risk of maladaptive reactions to job loss include:**

- Recent multiple psychosocial stressors (financial, personal, family, marital problems, the death of significant others)
- Major medical illness
- History of substance abuse
- Limited social support systems
- How the employee has coped with stressful situations in the past

Although individual reactions to job loss and the transition process vary considerably, supervisors hold a key position in helping employees cope more effectively with job loss.

### Ways for Supervisors to Facilitate Employees' Coping Process:

Listen and communicate continuously with employees before, during, and after downsizing to the extent possible, both formally and informally. This can best be accomplished through the use of multiple media, i.e. staff meetings, newsletters, audio-visual aids, memos, e-mails, informal breakfast/coffee break meetings, one to one and group meetings.

- Give facts. Provide updates with accurate information, which helps dispel rumors or inaccurate information.
- Communicate with survivors of job loss (those who keep their jobs), as these employees also feel the impact of their co-workers' layoff, i.e. increased uncertainty, survivor guilt, and/or changed work duties.

### Some Things to Consider when Preparing for a Layoff Meeting

As a supervisor or manager, the task of laying someone off can be one of the most difficult and stressful parts of the job. When someone is laid off, they experience more than just a loss of income. It can mean loss of professional identity, loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, loss of daily routine, loss of purposeful activity, work-based social network, and loss of security.

Before you have to sit in front of an employee to give them the news that they are losing their job, here are some things to consider.

- What do you know about this employee, about their personal life?
- Do they have a family? Pets?
- Are they living alone or with a partner?
- Have they had any recent losses such as a death in the family or divorce?
- Are they the sole income provider?
- Do they have a social network outside of their work environment?
- How long have they worked at the university and how close are they to retirement?

### Notifying the Employee of a Layoff

Telling an employee that they have been chosen for a layoff is difficult, but it is part of a supervisor's responsibility. In a notification meeting, you can expect to see a wide range of normal emotional reactions. Some ideas for conducting the meeting include the following:

Just as you need to be prepared for a hiring interview, you need to be ready for a layoff meeting. Write down your thoughts. Rehearse it if you need to. When the employee comes to meet with you, be compassionate and show sincere understanding, but keep your focus on the message you need to communicate. Then say the words. Be clear and concise. For example, "I know you're aware [name] that the university is facing severe budget cuts and departments have been asked to reduce their budgets across the campus. I'm truly sorry to have to tell you that, as a result, your position is being eliminated or restructured." Do not say "might be cut"; or, "will have to be cut." This is unclear, might make it sound like there is room for negotiation, and confuse the employee.

After you have made the announcement, sit quietly, wait for the employee to digest what you have said, and wait for a response. Then you can respond to those reactions. Don't continue to ramble out of nervousness.

### Dealing with Employee Reactions

Anticipate any variety of emotional reactions. Don't be afraid to ask how they're doing. Some employees might expect to be laid off. Others will be truly shocked. Others might become anxious. Be prepared to be supportive. Others might become angry. Listen to them without becoming defensive.

Most employees will be in shock over the news and not remember much of the conversation you will have with them. For this reason, repeating the information during the notification meeting is often helpful. Some might have anticipated this news and be more emotionally prepared. Even employees who appear to have things under control might be covering up their deeper feelings.

### Employee Engagement During Uncertain Times

Whether your department is experiencing layoffs or not, nearly everyone at UCD is feeling the effects of the current and pending budget cuts. When people are anxious they can become fearful or demoralized. Evidence of this might be rumors or gossip and fewer collegial relationships. All of these behaviors can lead to decreased productivity exactly at the time when we need to work more effectively, often with reduced resources.

As a manager, you can have an enormous impact on the climate in your unit. This tip sheet is designed to identify some specific steps you can take to keep morale high and to keep employees engaged. Employee engagement is evident when employees bring their hearts, minds, and spirits – not just their bodies – to work each day. It describes the emotional connection an employee feels to his or her workplace.

A Towers Perrin Talent Study identified five top factors for maintaining high employee engagement. They are listed below, in order of importance, along with some ideas for how you can leverage these factors on behalf of your employees and your department.

### **1. Senior management interest in employees**

Frequent and open communication and honest dialogue are the clearest evidence of management interest in employees. It is especially important in times of uncertainty and change to communicate, communicate, and communicate!

- Meet regularly with members of your staff – both 1:1 and as a group. Use these meetings to encourage information sharing within staff – give them the chance to learn from each other.
- Encourage them to bring their questions to you. Answer what you can and tell them honestly when you don't know the answer to a question.
- Ask them to bring rumors to you before discussing them with coworkers.  
Address rumors by providing accurate information. This will help stop the spread of negativity.
- Make sure you share as much as you can about what cuts are being made and why.
  
- Be available to employees. Seek them out and have an open door policy so that they can approach you easily.

Listen carefully, with an open mind and without defensiveness. Know that you can't fix everything that is troubling your staff, but you can acknowledge concerns.

Show frequent and honest appreciation. Even a simple thank you goes a long way to demonstrate your commitment to your staff.

### **2. Challenging work**

Times of change are also times of opportunity. Think about ways to give your staff chances to learn and develop.

- **A s k** your staff to identify which parts of their job are most interesting or satisfying to them. Work with them to find ways to leverage these tasks.
- Ask them what they need in order to feel that they are doing their best work, and help them move in that direction as best as you can.

Make sure that each employee can see how his/her work furthers your department's goals and how your department's work or goals support the UCD's mission.

### **3. Decision-making authority**

Consider change as an opportunity to do things differently; model this point of view for your staff. Think about new or additional ways you can use your staff's experience and expertise to manage the work and add a sense of value.

- Give employees appropriate opportunities to make decisions about their own work. Pay attention, offer support, make sure they're moving in the right direction and then let them proceed on their own.
- Involve employees wherever possible in problem-solving or decision-making about work in your area.
- Request their input and ideas about how to improve efficiency or how to decide which tasks can be outsourced or dropped.

#### 4. Customer orientation

Help employees focus on the work of your unit and the work of UCD. How can they bring their best selves to the work at hand?

- Who are their customers and how can they best serve them?
- How might customer needs be changing as their own departments undergo change?

#### 5. Career advancement opportunities

Now is the worst possible time for employees to hunker down and stop developing. Encourage employees to set goals for themselves—for both their current position and for their longer term career interests.

- Help them get the training and information to meet these goals.
- Checking on their progress, encouraging them and holding them accountable are additional ways you can demonstrate your interest.

Consider being a role model for your employees by openly refusing to worry about the unknown or things you cannot change in the future. Encourage others to focus on what they can control.

### [Keeping Employees Engaged After a Layoff](#)

All of the steps listed above can be helpful in keeping the remaining employees informed and engaged. Other things to keep in mind include the following: Embody respect. In companies where there have been layoffs, fear can undermine daily work and lead to loss of productivity. There might be gossip, rumors, and lots of lost time. People might begin to see colleagues as competitors, eroding the collegiality and spirit in your group.

The best way to embody respect for employees is to be honest and straight with them. Don't hide the truth; employees want and deserve to know what's going on. Don't offer false guarantees or try to sugar-coat the current reality. Communicating respectfully also includes telling employees when you don't know the answers to their questions or concerns. Communicate regularly, keeping them up-to-date on changes and expectations. Involve them in key decisions. Ask your staff questions. Ask for ideas. Ask them what they need, what they want. Even if you can't accommodate them, asking shows that you care.

Reduce stress and anxiety through modeling. Especially during uncertain or difficult times, it's important to remember that you can only control what you can control. Worrying about what is going to happen will only result in more worrying. You can be an example for your employees by staying positive, upbeat, and focused on the work. Demonstrate for your employees that you are in control of yourself and your emotions. Don't buy into the rumor mill and ask your employees not to do so either. Encourage them to bring rumors to your attention. Encourage them to focus on what they CAN control – getting plenty of rest, taking care of their health, staying focused on their jobs and finding ways to have some fun—both at work and in their off hours. All of these are ways to reduce stress.

All employees are affected by layoffs in their departments, even the employees who remain. Here we offer some steps managers can take with remaining employees after layoffs have occurred. Once layoff notifications are complete, you might consider meeting with the retained employees to tell them of the layoffs as soon as possible, while keeping in mind the wishes of the laid off employee(s) for possible privacy. Some guidelines:

- Choose a location that will be private and uninterrupted
- Make every effort to have all retained employees present
- Allow for at least a half-hour

*Sample opening language: "I have some difficult news to share with all of you. As you are aware, we have been in the process of planning layoffs at the university. Our department was not exempt. As a result, # people will be leaving their jobs. Each individual has been informed. I want to tell you that we do not anticipate any additional layoffs this year, but we are still assessing the result of the budget cuts and can't completely predict what will happen in the future. I'm sure that you have questions and reactions to what I've said. Let me take some time to hear from you."*

Be prepared for any of the following statements or questions.

- How was it decided that layoffs are necessary in our department?
- Can you tell us a little bit about the layoff package?
- How are [the laid off people] doing?
- When will their last day be?
- What will happen to [person's] work?
- What should we say to anyone calling for [specific employee] who has been laid off and is no longer here?
- How are we planning to say goodbye?
- I'm too busy to assume his/her work!

Let your employees know what the next few days will look like. Communication is essential, and it will be important for you to set up (if possible) one-on-one time to check in with folks. Depending on the nature of the terminating employee's role, there might be some immediate next steps that will require your and your work team's attention; for example, phone coverage, the following day's schedule, and work reassignments. Explain that you are establishing a temporary plan to accomplish work through the transition period so that essential workflow is uninterrupted.

*Sample language: "Have I answered most of your questions? If so, I'd like to make certain that over the next few days we'll have our bases covered in light of [person's] transition. I have some ideas about a few items, but I would like to hear what your thoughts are too."*

Take care of essential business only. Then, schedule a follow-up meeting (ideally within 3-4 days) with the members of your staff, individually or in small groups, to talk about work redistribution, roles, and future direction of your area in light of the staff reduction.

### [Moving Forward After Layoffs](#)

Your ability to communicate effectively and regularly with your staff after layoffs, will prove invaluable in the long term. During periods of layoffs, people might show signs of anxiety, lack of commitment, and even a decrease in productivity and creativity. In the weeks and months that follow a layoff or reorganization, strong leadership strategies are required to help employees focus on the priorities at hand and to recommit themselves to the organization. Your leadership will be the key element in helping the members of your staff to recognize and deal with their emotions. Listen well and listen often.

Some specific suggestions:

- Hold regular meetings with the staff and have an agenda
- Ask how people are doing and be prepared to listen and respond empathetically
- Ask what "rumors" are out there and either validate or dispel
- Check-in 1:1 more often
- Set clear, realistic, attainable short-term goals
- Stay focused on the work of the department
- Establish an open door policy
- Let staff members know that they can and should come directly to you with questions, concerns, information

## How ASAP can Help

- Identify those employees who may be more vulnerable to the stress of layoffs, and so at greater risk for a maladaptive response to impending job loss.
- If you receive a notice that an employee(s) are going to be laid off, encourage employee(s) to contact ASAP for one or more pre-transition counseling sessions. This intervention enables employees to learn and utilize coping strategies for the impending layoff. ASAP can provide individual counseling sessions as necessary and assist throughout the transition process.
- Assist managers in dealing with their own reactions or reactions of employees about the layoff and department reorganization.

## Laid Low by Layoffs

***An in-depth study of line managers finds that many who are involved with layoffs can become "calloused" or "emotionally numb." They report increases in ulcers, headaches and heart trouble. Can HR prescribe a cure?***

*By Michael O'Brien*

If the thought of having to announce layoffs makes your stomach turn, you're not alone. According to the results of a 10-year academic study of more than 400 line managers working for an airplane manufacturer, the long-term effects of laying off workers include sleep problems, emotional exhaustion and dizziness for those charged with bearing such bad news to their workers.

The study, *Managing in Tough Times: The Impact of Layoffs on Front-Line Managers*, was conducted by Sarah Moore, a professor of psychology at the University of Puget Sound; Leon Grunberg, a professor from the university's comparative psychology department; and Edward Greenberg, a political science professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Yale University Press published it as a book entitled *Turbulence: Living through Workplace Change*.

The study states that "focusing on this neglected group of what some researchers have graphically called 'executioners,' who may soon number in the tens of thousands, can also help organizations take steps to mitigate the considerable amount of distress some may experience as they live through a very painful process."

"It seems to me," says Leon Grunberg, co-author of the report, "that a lot of [managers in the study] dealt with [their mental and physical conditions] on their own. It sounds trite, but everyone assumes it's the people laid off that get a lot of [support], but the survivors need help, too. No one really thought of managers as people who might be affected emotionally."

He says managers need to feel "some sensitivity to what they're going through" from their own managers, in addition to having access to counseling.

In interviews, several of the "layoff agents," as they are called in the study, said they had become "calloused" or "emotionally numb" and said they did not want to get "close to people until things stabilized" and wanted to "tune out and shut down."

Similar feelings of emotional and physical distancing were reported by "downsizing agents" as well, according to the study that examines the effects of restructurings on managers and workers at Boeing's manufacturing plants in Washington since 1996.

The study found that managers who implemented layoffs were more likely than other managers to report sleep problems as well as "various symptoms of poor health, such as ulcers, headaches and heart trouble".

Those managers were also more likely than the others to seek treatment from health professionals for these problems. The researchers also found that managers who issued warning notices or layoffs reported significantly higher levels of job stress, lower levels of job security, higher levels of depression and higher levels of emotional exhaustion.

The research "demonstrated quite clearly that implementing layoffs produced deleterious consequences on job attitudes and well-being measures both in the short term, and, to a lesser degree, the long term," according to the report.

Grunberg says the depth to which managers felt the effects of layoffs was unexpected.

"I was surprised by the qualitative interviews and what people told us in terms of how powerful the impact was," he says. "They used words like 'devastating,' 'gut-wrenching.' "

He also was surprised to "find such negative results -- given that [Boeing] goes to such lengths" to ensure a transparent and fair process for layoffs.

A call to Boeing about the study's findings was not immediately returned.

Grunberg says that in any layoff situation, it helps when the company makes it "a collective decision. That takes a lot of the individual responsibility away. It helps dilute that sense of guilt" a manager may feel when making a layoff.

But, at the same time, the process needs to be personalized. Efforts to de-personalize the layoff process (i.e., using e-mails or sending out letters regarding layoffs) can have negative effects on both the manager and the employee being laid off, the authors write.

"We believe this is an unwise option because although it might spare managers some discomfort, it dehumanizes those to be laid off and is likely to engender antagonistic responses from victims and survivors," they state.

Grunberg says support groups might help in that managers making layoffs would be able to share their feelings with each other.

"In terms of emotional impact, it certainly helps to talk about it and know you're not the only one experiencing it," he says.

Marina London, a spokesperson for the Employee Assistance Professionals Association, based in Arlington, Va., says she is "absolutely not" surprised by the study's findings.

"Often the front-line managers are the most stressed folks in the equation in the kinds of layoffs and crises in the workplace," she says. "They're often put in the position of laying people off, while being given very little training to do it."

She advises HR executives to enlighten managers about the company's employee-assistance program, if there is one -- before layoffs -- in order to better equip them with the tools they'll need to cope with the trauma.

"It's really important to get support in to the managers prior to the layoffs. That's ideal," she says. "Most EAPs provide training and support to managers, so in an ideal universe, if a company knows they have to lay off folks, they should get the EAP into the workplace to train the managers and offer support," she says.

"The more proactive HR managers can be, in terms of approaching [layoffs] as a partnership with the EAP program, the better it's going to be for everyone involved," she says.

The study describes layoff activity as "handing out both [warning] and layoff notices, and, for people supervising white-collar workers, participation in the selection of those to be laid off."

In a previous paper by the researchers that examined the responses of 410 middle and front-line managers at Boeing in 2003, the researchers found evidence that those who implemented layoffs were "more likely to report increased distancing behavior" than those who had not been directly involved in layoffs.

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