Communication with Compassion: Preparing, Conducting & Surviving Layoff Notifications

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Introduction

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.

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. Below are some tips on how to deliver the news that is both compassionate and direct.

PREPARATION

Preparation is a key to successfully delivering the message.

Before the Meetings

1. Work with HR 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. Become familiar with the layoff process and the content of the separation materials.

4. Discuss with your management any possible problems you feel could occur or any concerns you may have; arrange for another manager to be with you during the meeting if appropriate.

5. Anticipate questions that you could be asked and find the answers.

6. Practice and rehearse the message you will deliver.

7. Schedule the meeting in a private place where you will not be interrupted.

8. Remember that you are not personally responsible for the lay-off/reduction in time. If you feel the need, HR is available for consultation.

9. 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.

Key Messages to Include in Script

Here are some key messages you may want to include in your script as you prepare for the layoff notification meetings.

- This decision is no reflection upon you as a person or upon your individual contribution to the organization.
- There are no good ways to deliver bad news and we want to be sensitive to your needs. It is understandable that you may have questions. The material you have in hand will answer many of your questions; in addition there are phone numbers and contact people listed who can answer specific questions.
- I am sure that you may experience a wide range of reactions to this news. Following this meeting you are welcome to attend a meeting with a Career Transition Services representative from the Village. The representative can provide information on the outplacement services that will be made available to you. They also have some additional information that may help you and your family to deal with this news.
- You do not need to report for work until your regularly scheduled work time tomorrow.

CONDUCTING

The Notification Meeting

The primary purposes of the notification meeting are:

- To inform the employee that their job has been eliminated and that they are being terminated.
- To provide the employee with important information to about rights, benefits, and pay.
Your Role

1. Don’t procrastinate — do it first thing in the morning and **not** on a Friday. Allow the employee to go home after hearing the news. During the meeting get directly to the point, announce the action calmly, stick with the script, control the meeting, keep the person focused.

2. Do not make any comments, even if well intended, that could compromise the decision; stay away from discussions that could confuse the primary message (e.g., performance or personal issues). Avoid small talk, using humor or being apologetic.

3. Be direct and firm, and assure that the person knows the decision is final. Be sensitive to the person’s situation.

4. Briefly explain the reasons for the layoff. Don’t blame others for actions being taken.

5. Be conscious of your own reactions and don’t become defensive, argumentative or confrontational — your role is not to justify the decision that has been made.

6. Listen; document anything that could lead to a potential problem and advise your manager and human resources immediately.

7. Know the safety plan if an employee appears to be reacting to the news in a hostile or threatening manner.

8. Review and complete the required forms with the employee.

9. Be very clear about the next steps such as reporting for work, effective dates, status of insurance and who to contact for details on these issues. Clarify the separation date.

10. Make arrangements to collect all company property; advise the employee when access to voice mail, e-mail, and computer systems will be discontinued.

11. Offer support and encouragement. Describe the assistance available through Human Resource or your employer’s EAP.

12. Be available to address the employee’s issues and concerns about the lay-off

13. Treat the employee in a dignified manner

14. Once you have conducted the meetings notify Human Resources and other identified groups/individuals.

What Problems May Occur?

- The employee may become resistant, defensive, and/or non-accepting of the action.

- The employee may want to plead a case or bargain for another opportunity.
The person may want to speak with a “decision-maker.”

The employee may ask the "why me?” questions: This is a natural reaction question that has no answer that will be satisfactory. A response should be only that "the decisions were difficult ones and many good people were affected.”

Many people will press you to know who is being retained, as they will often compare themselves and make a case for their retention. This, too, is not unusual, but you cannot comment.

The person may threaten a lawsuit or other retaliation.

The person will try to make the issue personal or about performance.

The employee may argue about a person being retained whom they believe is less capable or has less seniority.

The employee may exhibit other types of emotion.

Note: If possible before the meeting if you practice role playing how to deal with some of these potential problems you will be better prepared to handle and address them during the actual notification meeting.

How to Deal with the Problems

- Stay in control of the meeting and your emotions at all times; keep the discussion focused on the employee.
- Let the person know that they are free to make whatever contacts they feel appropriate, but that their employment is being terminated.
- Reiterate that the decision is not about performance or about other employees.

Reactions Employees May Have After the Meeting

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

Note: You can let the outgoing employee know that they have access to The Village Business Institute Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and can utilize that program if they would like to talk to a counselor about how to process their emotions or feelings about the situation or would like to meet with a financial counselor in order to create a financial plan in order to help them through this difficult time.

SURVIVING

After the Layoff

It’s important to respond to the feelings of the remaining staff members and communicate a positive image for the future. Do not assume “business as usual,” employees will have questions and concerns going forward. A series of team meetings might ensure an ongoing safe place for communication. Important topics to address with the remaining employees:

• Acknowledge that it is normal to feel anxious during these uncertain times.
• Explain the department reorganization and redefine roles.
• Discuss any impact on workload/work flow.
• 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.
• Be accessible to your people.
• Never make any disparaging remarks about anyone leaving the company.

• Thank people for their continued support, restate the business objectives and make no promises or guarantees about the future.

• End on a positive note; remind staff members of their value and importance.

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

Note: You can let employees know that they have access to The Village Business Institute Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and can utilize that program if they would like to talk to a counselor about if they are having difficulty with the changes.
APPENDIX A: Checklist for Reduction in Workforce Decisions

The following checklist may aid you when facing the need to create or implement a reduction in the workforce.

1. Decide the number of positions that must be eliminated.
2. Do not use money as a guideline. Typically, the higher the pay, the older the employee.
3. Do not offer voluntary retirement to all eligible employees. It may be too expensive and you may lose good people.
4. Make the decisions over a reasonable span of time, rather than in a crisis situation.
5. Once you have decided the number of positions to cut, establish the criteria for terminating employees. Generally, basing the terminations on competence/skills/performance is best. The application of prior performance reviews is often helpful unless you have created a monster, i.e. everyone always receives satisfactory ratings. As an aside, it is best to establish a forced ranking system to aid you whenever a reduction in force is required.
6. Management should establish the criteria, not the front-line supervisors.
7. The front-line supervisors are to apply the criteria.
8. Management should review the application by the supervisors of the criteria.
9. Do not terminate those individuals such as the front-line supervisors, who are involved in the reduction in force.
10. Review the reduction in force statistically for adverse impact on minorities including those over 40.
11. Offer outplacement.
12. Terminate all employees at once rather than over a period of time.
13. Prepare a script for termination. Say why the positions are being eliminated. Do not sugar-coat the explanation.
14. Do not announce the terminations and allow the employees to continue to work. Their last day of work should be the day the terminations are announced.