

Managing Workplace Reactions to Layoffs

The following are some proven ways for management to reduce the negative effects on staff of cutbacks, reorganizations and layoffs:

Display a calm, realistic and positive attitude

Directors, managers and supervisors set the tone as to how the work group will react to the stress and challenge of unwelcome change.

When you are on an airplane flight and there is significant air turbulence, one looks to the pilot and the flight attendants for guidance and reassurance. For your staff, you are the pilot and flight attendant. Your behavior and attitude are critical elements in steering the group successfully through the transition.

A positive attitude does not imply that you should deny the difficult and unfortunate aspects of what might be happening. Rather, it involves reassuring your staff that you are all up to the challenge.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

When employees are in a state of anxiety, especially about something as basic as layoffs and job security, it is normal for them not to hear and take in everything you are telling them about what is going on.

Therefore, you cannot communicate enough and in too many ways about what is happening during times of difficult change.

Employees who have useful information will feel less out of control and more empowered. They will also be better equipped to attend to daily job duties instead of worrying unnecessarily. When you are sick and tired of hearing yourself say the same thing time and time again, you may have finally gotten the information across to your staff.

Be visible and supportive on a regular basis

Taking the time to show your presence among your staff and provide words of encouragement, will do a lot to reassure your workers.

During times of change, employees can get anxious if they do not see their manager or supervisor. They may start to imagine that things are going even worse than expected, and that this is why management has been absent.

Using the airplane analogy again, what would you start to think if the flight attendant disappeared into the pilot's cabin for a long period of time?

Openly acknowledge the difficult times

There is a common misconception that if you acknowledge that times are difficult or stressful, it will make things worse. The opposite is true. The more we “normalize” employee reactions, and let employees know that we understand they are affected by budget cuts and uncertainty – the more they will feel understood and cared for – and be able to function productively.

It is also a good idea to talk about how emotions can be more intense at times like this, and that we all need to be especially kind and patient with each other. At the same time, be patient with employees, who have intense reactions about what is happening. You will probably have to hear some negative talk and allow staff to vent within reasonable limits.

Understand the change process and common reactions to change

As a manager, who is responsible for guiding your staff, it is very helpful for you to understand some of the common stages and reactions experienced by employees as they are going through the change process. The typical stages include: denial, resistance, exploration and commitment. Below are some common reactions to these stages:

- **Denial**

“This will never really happen – if I just don’t think about it, it will go away.”

- **Resistance**

For employees about to be laid off: “I will find a way to reverse this layoff decision”

For remaining employees: “There is no way that I am going to consider taking on any more responsibility or work”

- **Exploration**

For employees about to be laid off: “I think I will go to that meeting to find out about the layoff process, benefits and support services”

For remaining employees: “I guess I can find a way to take this on and be more efficient in how I do things.”

- **Commitment**

For employees about to be laid off: “I am working on a good plan with my outplacement counselor for finding a new job”

For remaining employees: “I can see some good challenges with the new way we will be doing things.”

Each person will go through the stages at their own pace. Some may get stuck in the stages of denial or resistance, and will need extra help in moving forward. Some employees may be especially vulnerable to experiencing anxiety or depression as a result of what is happening at work and in their home life. Others may revert to previous stages of change.



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Include appropriate staff in decision-making and planning

Periods of negative change caused by external forces make employees feel especially out of control of their work circumstances. Allowing staff to add their input before, during and after cutbacks will increase their sense of control and add to their ability to trust management, contribute creative ideas, and commit to new ways of doing things. It can be especially useful with employees who “stir things up” to redirect their energy into meaningful ways to effect the transition.

Exhibit respectful and helpful behavior toward departing staff

Treating employees who are losing their jobs with care and support, will help them deal with the challenges they have in finding new work and surviving the layoff experience. It will also send a positive and reassuring message to remaining staff and others at the University.

Do not distance yourself from those who are leaving and offer to stay in touch and offer future support in their job search.

Provide support for remaining staff

Remaining staff will be dealing with the loss of former coworkers, guilt about not losing their jobs, ongoing job insecurity and often increased workloads. It may be helpful to set aside some time during ongoing staff meetings to check in and let staff who want to talk about how they are doing. You can do this for a set amount of meeting time, in order to avoid having it take up the meeting. Some other proven ways to deal with staff morale include the following:

- Clarify roles, responsibilities and work priorities
- Set realistic performance expectations
- Show appreciation for work effort
- Continue and/or initiate workplace celebrations or rituals; be mindful of certain dates and varying cultural beliefs, attitudes and expectations.
- Support staff training and career development
- Acknowledge trust concerns and continued job anxiety
- Acknowledge emotional issues for survivors such as guilt or loss
- Support needed breaks and vacations
- Remind staff of available resources

Employee Assistance staff are available to meet with employees or family members who are experiencing difficulties. Call for a free, confidential appointment at 510-643-7754.



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