

THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF LAY-OFFS AND NON-RENEWALS

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Any process of lay-off or non-renewal of employees produces a profound emotional impact on the workforce. Even the threat of losing one's job creates a traumatic fear at the deepest primal levels. The psyche goes to the worst case scenarios – joblessness, homelessness, inability to care for ones family, potential illnesses, etc. We have all seen what these things look like and, although we may “know” these are probably not going to happen, there is no guarantee that they won't.

The threat of lay-off /non-renewal (LO/NR) affects everyone in the workplace; the person being laid off, the staff remaining in the workplace and the management involved in the LO/NR. In this article I want to discuss the immediate and ongoing impact on everyone involved.

The laid off and non-renewed employee

Of course, the person most affected by a lay off is the person being let go. The trauma goes beyond the concerns raised above. There is a loss of status, of belonging to the organization. Work provides meaning for one's life, connections to others, respect, affirmation.

Suddenly, the LO/NR person does not belong to the group, is an outsider. This person is angry, hurt, engulfed in feelings of helplessness, rage, sadness, and loss. This person is uncertain about how to behave in this new status. The temptation to fight or flight is apparent, frustration at feeling vulnerable and angry at becoming the “other.”

There are stages or processes this person will need to go through in order to regain his or her equilibrium. Ideally, this person will be recognized for their contributions to the organization and will have their relationships celebrated. Those remaining in the workplace will express their regret at the loss and offer support at this time of crisis. Those being LO/NR should let their coworkers know what they want in terms of asking how they are doing, or would they like to talk. The LO/NR person should assume their role as a professional and maintain their dignity by contributing to the workplace even though they are also working through the feelings related to loss.

The surviving employees

The employees remaining in the workplace also experience considerable trauma during this time. First of all, their security is seriously shaken. If this can happen to someone else, it can happen to me. Also, there is a major disruption in the status quo; relationships are severed, work is redistributed with a probable increase in everyone's workload.

A great sense of disease sets in; people do not know how to behave. Surviving employees fear their own lay off or non-renewal and are relieved to have a job, which produces confusion as to how to relate to others in the workplace. We don't want to say the

wrong things so we shy away from eye contact with those leaving. This confusion can make the person who is leaving feel abandoned and rejected. It is important to acknowledge one's feelings of sadness, concern, even fear, with everyone in the workplace. Talk to the LO/NR person and say how sorry you are that they are leaving. Ask if you can help in any way. Take them to lunch; plan to celebrate their contributions to the organization.

Supervisors and managers

The 'old school' says that managers and supervisors need to be 'above' feelings and to behave in a dispassionate way during LO/NR. What they are doing is acknowledging the emotional impact of the experience, but hiding the impact from others. There is an implication that unless they appear 'professional' and somewhat removed from the proceedings; they will lose control over the situation. This is the wrong way to handle the situation.

Managers need to acknowledge their concern for the person being LO/NR as well as for those remaining. In fact, it is important for the manager to acknowledge his or her own pain in losing trusted colleagues, and to become involved in the emotional experience with everyone else. The manager will be able to set appropriate limits, if necessary, and to apply discipline in situations requiring such action, while being a 'real' person with his or her staff.

When the LO/NR person remains in the unit for some time

The crisis portion of the transition will end in a few days or a week. People begin to settle in to the new reality and focus on making the changes work. It is very important to include everyone in the transition process – including the LO/NR employee. Use his or her expertise and include them in staff meetings, etc. There should be an expectation that all employees are equally valued and since we are all professionals, everyone will do their part to make the unit function well.

We have all survived several traumas in our lifetime. Possibly we have already experienced job loss or the loss of someone close to us. Surviving these experiences confirms our resilience to life's ups and downs. We should rely on this resilience to help us ride out this storm. First, openly grieve the losses. Losing a job is not something for which to feel shame; it is not a statement about your value. Channel your anger in productive directions. Secondly, don't hide; ask for the help you need and let people comfort you. Thirdly, do what you can today; tomorrow will take care of itself.

If you want to talk to a professional counselor, call the Employee Assistance Program at 612-626-0253 or the Faculty and Academic Staff Assistance Program at 612-625-4073.