

Managing Layoff Survivors

A counselor offers tips on helping remaining employees succeed.

When layoffs are announced, remaining employees feel not only for their departing colleagues, but also for themselves—with twinges of anxiety about their own job security.

Layoff survivors also feel the burden of increased workloads. While fortunate to have jobs, these survivors may now have to do the work of two, three or more coworkers.

Many feel overwhelmed by the added tasks, yet dare not complain to managers for fear of losing their jobs in the next round of cutbacks.

At the same time, management is equally pressed to maintain maximum output with fewer workers. In lean times, as managers ask workers to take on more responsibilities, it becomes even more important to help workers succeed and feel satisfaction in their work.

Here are some ways that managers can begin making that happen for overwhelmed employees:

- ◆ Clearly explain expectations
- ◆ Give honest, consistent feedback
- ◆ Design optimum workloads
- ◆ Extend dignity and respect

Clearly Explain Expectations

When employees are given more responsibilities or bigger workloads, it raises questions in workers' minds. Is the job description the same as it was before the layoffs? What do managers expect of me?

Whether or not your employees directly ask you these questions, you can assume most of them are asking themselves—and many are uncertain of the answers.

Help them by eliminating the guesswork. Meet with each employee to clearly explain their roles, even if their responsibilities haven't changed.

Discuss specific job responsibilities in light of the cutbacks, and your expectations for their performance.

By taking this initiative with each employee, you chart courses for them that greatly increase their potential for success. This makes for a more satisfied work force, and helps accomplish your goals as well.

Give Honest, Consistent Feedback

Nothing dampens overwhelmed employees' morale more than uncertainty. Reducing a work force creates significant worries among the retained workers. Add to that, employees' apprehensions about whether they can do the assigned jobs, even after it's clearly explained, and you have a lot of potential anxiety.

Your job is to diffuse that anxiety as much as you can. You may not be able to assure them of job security, salary increases or better benefits—but you can lessen many fears by giving honest and consistent feedback. This kind of feedback works two ways.

First, it involves letting your employees know how they're doing. This is more than annual performance reviews—you should initiate ongoing conversations about what you see employees doing well, and what could be improved.

Frame the comments for improvement as compliments, instead of criticisms. For example: "Tom, I like the way you handle yourself with this client. They're a demanding group and you show a lot of poise. But watch your sarcasm in meetings, it could be easily misinterpreted."



It's much easier to hear the constructive comment when genuine affirmation is given first. Just make sure it's honest and not contrived—most employees see right through patronizing behavior.

The second part of honest feedback is inviting employees to express concerns and suggestions to you.

This can feel threatening to some managers who like to remind their employees that they're in charge. But employees want to know they'll be heard and appreciated.

Invite their feedback, and take their concerns and suggestions seriously. Consider how you might implement them. Make conscious efforts to tell employees as soon as possible about the outcome of their feedback. If it's a change employees could be involved in, by all means let them participate. This enhances ownership for the change and encourages creativity.

Design Optimum Workloads

Don't ask your overwhelmed employees to strive toward goals they can't reach. That only promotes feelings of failure and discouragement. Overwhelmed employees need to know they can rise to the expectations set for them.

One of the best ways to accomplish this is to create an optimum workload; where the goals set are just beyond their comfort level, but not too far beyond their reach.

For this to work, you need to ask yourself two questions:

Do my employees have the skills, experience and knowledge to fulfill their workloads? (Evaluate from employees' perspectives, not your own wishful thinking.)

Do my employees have the resources—time, space, equipment, finances—needed to accomplish the challenges?

If you answer "no" to either of these questions, you're setting up your employees for failure. Either lower your expectations or provide more resources, to assure their ability to succeed. The idea is to build overwhelmed employees' confidence, which is the greatest deterrent to anxiety.

Extend Dignity and Respect

Respect the apprehension, anxiety and fear that your retained employees are likely to feel. A manager who ignores these emotions, or who treats employees as if they should feel indebted to the company for letting them keep their jobs, will be out of touch with workers.

Most employees want to do their jobs and to do them well. What they need in return from management is appreciation for their efforts, and reasonable understanding for the human side of life. It's hard to overstate how important this is, and how far it will go toward making the workplace an environment where managers and employees can succeed.

Overwhelmed employees won't stay overwhelmed—if they're certain of their roles and responsibilities, if they can expect to receive and give honest communication, and if they have workloads that build their confidence.

Add generous amounts of respect, and you no longer have overwhelmed employees — nor overwhelmed managers.

Source: Gilles, G. (n.d.). *Managing layoff survivors*. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Benefits.

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