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Letting them down easy

Layoffs are painful for all involved; here are tips to ease the sting

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"The best thing is for you not to say too much. You don't know how it's going to come out sounding."
Kathy Condon Vancouver-Based Communications Coach

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Whether you're a boss who might have to lay someone off, or a worker who fears a tap on the shoulder, participating in a layoff is no one's idea of fun.

And if you've only been reading about layoffs in news headlines, that could change. Recently released figures pin Clark County's unemployment rate at 13.4 percent, and it's probably going to get worse before it gets better. State regional economist Scott Bailey predicts we will see layoffs in government, manufacturing, retail and hospitality in the coming months, with higher unemployment rates well into 2010.

Here are some ways to handle the awkward and painful layoff.

If you're the one doing the layoffs

Telling employees they no longer have a job is one of the hardest things bosses will ever have to do, made more difficult by the fact that they don't get any sympathy, said Kathy Condon, a Vancouver-based communications coach.

There's no perfect way to lay workers off, but some ways are better than others.

For one, the bad news must be delivered in person, said both Condon and Thomas Tripp, a management professor at Washington State University Vancouver.

"The best thing to do is to deliver the news privately, bring them in and talk to them, and let the person vent," Condon said. "The best thing you can say is, 'I hear what you're saying.'"

The worst thing to do? "Come in and tap them on the shoulder and lead them out of there under security," said Tripp, author of "Getting Even: The Truth About Workplace Revenge — and How to Stop It." "A lot of firms do that, but very few firms actually need to."

Condon suggests giving workers some help updating their résumés before they leave the building. A session with an outside consultant also gives workers a chance to unload negative feelings.

Most important, Tripp said, is to use a fair, transparent process and keep employees informed about cutbacks. Let them know if they're likely, and then tell them when the decision will be made.

"One thing that's very clear," he said. "When people perceive the process is fair, they will tolerate outcomes they don't like."

If you're the one being laid off

As shocked and angry as you may feel, keep it to yourself.

"The best thing is for you not to say too much. You don't know how it's going to come out sounding," Condon said. "Stay goal focused," Tripp agreed. "You don't want to take any parting shots that will jeopardize your chance to find another job."

If you have time, gather your list of contacts, say goodbye to co-workers and let them know how to reach you.

A day or two later, send a note to the people you enjoyed working with, Condon said. Not only do you want to maintain contacts in your industry to find your next job, it will make chance encounters with former co-workers less awkward, Condon said.

"Just do your best to be gracious," Tripp said, "because it's in your own best interest."

If you're the one left after a layoff

Feel grateful you still have a job, brace yourself for more work and consider yourself warned.

"If you are a survivor, you need to take a close look at how the company treated the people just laid off," Tripp said. "If people were treated like would-be criminals instead of loyal employees, you can assume the same could happen to you. If that's not tolerable, look at your options. Maybe you can change the company for the better, or maybe you should leave."

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If you haven't already, make sure you have a duplicate copy of your contact list at home, Condon said.

But self-preservation is only one aspect of surviving a layoff.

Make a point of reaching out to your laid-off co-workers. You don't have to have the perfect words, Condon said.

"I would probably say, 'No words work, just let me give you a hug,'" Condon said. "You don't want to say, 'I know how you feel.' Those are empty words. What we don't want at this particular time is empty words."

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