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The Survivors: Post Redundancy Planning

For some, the prospect of redundancy, which embodies so many losses – income, job security, status, familiar routine, friendships, ambitions, hopes and dreams, 'belonging' – can become a devastating reality. Add to this the hushed tones and avoidance of colleagues and the distress can escalate. Within a culture where any hint of emotional vulnerability implies weakness and failure, individuals may isolate themselves further, and perhaps enter dangerous territory (severe alcohol/drug abuse, suicidal behaviour). The stress builds during consultation periods when many who will not be made redundant are still informed of the possibility. Of course there will be many employees for whom redundancy offers an opportunity for change, even freedom or adventure; for them outplacement services can offer practical and positive help and guidance. These days HR departments are usually equipped with the appropriate procedures to support those leaving as part of a redundancy programme.

But what about the 'survivors'? The colleagues left behind, and the managers who have been doing the firing? We often consider Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to be a result of war, terrorist bombs, horrific car accidents or workplace deaths, such as passengers killed under trains. A common reaction is a sense of guilt and helplessness amongst those who survive (so-called 'survivor guilt'). Whilst the cause may be considered less traumatic, the psychological reaction to the redundancy of fellow workers can be identical. Most would have been facing the same fate. The initial reaction of colleagues who have survived 'the axe' may well be one of relief but within seconds this can turn into guilt and grief. This may be particularly acute where 'the victims' are 'the survivor's' close friends or long-term colleagues, or where the colleague made redundant has been suffering from some other trauma or stress. As with PTSD, the reaction may not surface immediately but like a spring-loaded box, the apparently light pressure of a subsequent incident can trigger the release of submerged emotions.

And so some survivors of redundancy programmes will need to go through the equivalent of the grieving process associated with bereavement. Others will follow a more logical path to rationalise the event away. But most will be pondering the inevitable question, "Will I, or we, be next?" This response to the potential threat of their own redundancy will produce in many the urge to 'fight or flight'. Aggression amongst those who remain, or withdrawal or absence, are the natural consequences of these two impulses. At these times the leaders of the business, and the HR teams supporting them, need to be fully alert to the different reactions and needs of 'survivor staff', if they are going to keep them focused, retain their loyalty and prevent star employees from going elsewhere or following different career options.

But what about the emotions and reactions of managers or the other 'executioners' in the process? Whilst some will be highly effective and appear 'Teflon coated' during the redundancy process it won't necessarily mean that they are experiencing no emotional response. In most cases they will have been the ones making the tough decisions on who stays and who goes. Others may simply feel helpless, having had to be largely the implementers of others' decisions, delegated the unwelcome task of making whole teams or departments redundant, or offering a minimalist redundancy package, all the while wondering whether once they have completed the firing of their staff, they will be next. Others, as a result of fear and flight, will want to do the minimum and get away from the workplace as fast as they can. A few will relish the opportunity to wield their power, demonstrate their prowess like warlords in front of their warriors or press home to their seniors that they are the alpha male or female to lead the remaining 'chosen ones' to their new future.

Redundancy can be one of the severest tests leaders have to face. Leadership in a bull market can be challenging, but spotting opportunities, attracting talent and executing nimbly are a lot easier against a backdrop of a momentum of growth and good economic returns. So in uncertain times what do leaders need to consider?

As with most leadership challenges there is no simple formula or right way of doing things. Leadership action needs to be aligned with the circumstances and relevant to those needing to be influenced, if necessary on an individual basis.

The starting point, as with all leadership, is to be authentic – it is vital to be you, to base your words and actions around your own personality, style and relationships. Whilst you may have to say things that are new, and that sit uneasily with your own emotions, values or beliefs, the more that your people see and experience you as the person they know, the greater the chance they will understand your actions and respect you for the role you are having to carry out.

Next, acknowledge that everyone's reactions will be different. Legitimise emotions; allow space for the grieving process; and give recognition to the past contributions of those who have left. Explain not blame. Provide the reasons for the redundancy, avoiding comment on individuals, and resisting the temptation to blame "those *****s in 'X' division who gambled away our jobs in search of bigger personal bonuses". Then motivate, Motivate and MOTIVATE! It won't be easy, there will be setbacks, mistakes will be made but as a leader – that's your job!

The practical steps to be taken will depend upon the situation of the company, the team, the individuals within it, the market and the current economic conditions. Consider your plan of action, 'What to do?' and importantly, 'What not to do?' Try and identify the unintended consequences of your potential actions and words. This is difficult when the reactions of individuals cannot be accurately predicted, but remember: leadership reputations are won and lost at times like these. In one company, the anger and resentment of senior managers and staff were burning strongly over a year after a redundancy programme – and all because a particular Board Director, after spending a Friday participating in a 'cull' of a significant number of employees, then calmly announced that he would be off on a two-week holiday to the Caribbean from that weekend to "avoid the flak on Monday!" In the subsequent months the director never really understood why his staff were not better motivated: "they'd all had time to get over the redundancy, and surely it had been a lesson to all that only the best had been retained?" The fact that some of the greatest talent had left during the twelve months since the redundancy programme never even made it onto his radar screen.

Consider, too, how best to motivate individuals. If a number of people from any one team or department have been made redundant, don't leave empty desks standing around for long as they can act as an invisible barrier to the re-building of team spirit, and serve as a harsh reminder of 'the fallen.' Recognise that individuals may be taking back particular responsibilities and duties that they had passed on to others who are now no longer there. The workload for a downsized department may continue at the same level, or even increase, despite a significantly reduced number of staff. The organisation may be asking individuals to do more with the realistic prospect of less reward at the very time when motivation is at its lowest ebb.

If, as it appears, we are now entering difficult economic times, volatile markets, the potential lengthy period of zero or low growth, or even a recession, planning for a single round of redundancies followed by a re-hiring spree (as has been typical practice in recent decades) will not be a sufficient or wise response for most companies. As a leader, it is vital to ensure that your comments or actions don't make you a hostage to fortune. Rash promises today with the best of intentions to motivate your fearful staff may be your millstone of tomorrow. Recognise the intelligence of your workforce: over-optimistic statements are more likely to generate suspicion and a lack of confidence in your abilities, than build trust and faith. Ensure that the people at your organisation's centre understand the emotions and reactions on the ground: in carrying out essential tasks, individuals charged with trying to save the company's future can become desensitised to the all-too-human responses of those around them. And at a time of uncertainty, the last thing you as the leader need are unwelcome communications, or actions that end up as counter-productive for the business.

Thinking through the leadership challenges redundancy poses is essential, and post-redundancy planning should be an active part of every redundancy programme.

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