



Keeping Remaining Employees Engaged After a Layoff*

Every employee is affected by layoffs in their department, even the employees who remain. This paper offers some steps managers can take with remaining employees after layoffs have occurred.

I. At the time of layoffs

Once layoff notifications are complete, it's a good idea for you to meet with the retained employees to tell them of the layoffs as soon as possible, while keeping in mind the wishes of the laid off employee(s). Some guidelines:

- Choose a location that will be private and uninterrupted
- Make every effort to have all retained employees present
- Allow for at least a half-hour

Step 1: At the meeting:

Based on your conversations with the laid off employees, you may share the names of the laid off employees, you may say that the employees prefer to tell co-workers individually, or you may do a combination of both. In any case, do let the remaining employees know that layoff notices have been given.

Sample opening language: I have some difficult news to share with all of you. As you know, we have been in the process of planning layoffs in our department. Jobs have been eliminated and as a result, # people will be leaving the organization. They have all been informed. I want to tell you that we do not anticipate any additional layoffs this year. We are still assessing the financial and organizational situation and can't predict what will happen in the future. I know that you have questions and reactions to what I've said. Let me pause now and hear from you.

Step 2: Handling employee reactions

Be prepared for any of the following statements or questions. If the staff doesn't ask these questions, you might want to offer the information.

- How was it decided that layoffs are necessary?
- Can you tell us a little bit about the layoff package? [Based on MIT's layoff policy]
- How are [the laid off people] doing?
- When will their last day be?
- What will happen to [person's] work?

* Adapted from "A Manager's Guide to Conducting Layoff Meetings," January 2009. Managers in areas with layoffs should be sure to obtain the entire packet from their HRO.



- What should we say to anyone calling for [specific employee] who has been laid off and is no longer here?
- How are we planning to say goodbye?
- Will we see [him/her] later today?
- I'm too busy to assume his/her work!

Step 3: Discussing next steps

Let your employees know what the next few days will look like. Communication is essential, and it will be important for you to set up (if possible) one-on-one time to check in with folks. Depending on the nature of the terminating employee's role, there may be some immediate next steps that will require your and your work team's attention, e.g., phone coverage, the following day's schedule, and work reassignments.

Explain that you are establishing a temporary plan to accomplish work through the transition period so that essential workflow is uninterrupted.

Sample language: "Have I answered most of your questions? If so, I'd like to make certain that, over the next few days, we'll have our bases covered in light of [person's] transition. I have some ideas about a few items, but would like to hear what you're thinking too..."

Take care of essential business only. Then, schedule a follow-up meeting (ideally within 3-4 days) with staff, individually or in small groups, to talk about work redistribution, roles and future direction of your area in light of the staff reduction.

II. Moving forward after layoffs

Your ability to communicate effectively and regularly with your staff after the layoffs will prove invaluable in the long term. People may show signs of anxiety, lack of commitment, and even a decrease in productivity and creativity. In the weeks and months that follow a layoff or reorganization, strong leadership strategies are required to help employees focus on the priorities at hand and to recommit themselves to the organization. Your leadership will be key in helping staff to recognize and deal with their emotions. Listen well and listen often.

Some specific suggestions:

- Hold regular meetings with staff and bring an agenda
- Ask how people are doing and be prepared to listen and respond empathetically
- Ask what "rumors" are out there and either validate or dispel
- Check-in 1:1 more often
- Set clear, realistic, attainable short-term goals
- Stay focused on the work of the department
- Establish an open door policy
- Let staff know that they can and should come directly to you with questions, concerns, information



III Keeping employees engaged

All of the steps listed above can be helpful in keeping the remaining employees informed and engaged. Other things to keep in mind include the following:

Embody respect

In companies where there have been layoffs, fear can undermine daily work and lead to loss of productivity. There may be gossip, rumors, and lots of lost time. People may begin to see colleagues as competitors, eroding the collegiality and spirit in your group.

The best way to embody respect for employees is to be honest and straight with them. Don't hide the truth; employees want and deserve to know what's going on. Don't offer false guarantees or try to sugar-coat the current reality. Communicating respectfully also includes telling employees when you don't know the answers to their questions or concerns.

Communicate regularly, keeping them up-to-date on changes and expectations. Involve them in key decisions. Ask your staff questions. Ask for their ideas. Ask them what they need, what they want. Even if you can't accommodate them, asking shows that you care.

Reduce stress and anxiety through modeling

Especially during uncertain or difficult times, it's important to remember that you can only control what you can control. Worrying about what is going to happen will only result in more worrying. You can be an example for your employees by staying positive, upbeat and focused on the work. Demonstrate for your employees that you are in control of yourself and your emotions. Don't buy into the rumor mill and ask your employees not to do so either. Encourage them to bring rumors to your attention. Encourage them to focus on what they CAN control – getting plenty of rest, taking care of their health, staying focused on their jobs and finding ways to have some fun – both at work and in their off hours. All of these are ways to reduce stress.

IV. Resources

Please keep in mind the numerous resources available for you and for your staff. These include additional articles on the OED website at <http://web.mit.edu/hr/oed/index.html>. Managers in areas with layoffs should be sure to obtain all relevant materials from their HRO (http://web.mit.edu/hr/empsservices/hro_depts.html)

In addition, employees may want to visit with their primary health providers, the MIT Personal Assistance Program (http://medweb.mit.edu/directory/services/personal_assistance.html), their HR Officer (http://web.mit.edu/hr/empsservices/hro_depts.html), or the MIT Ombuds Office (<http://web.mit.edu/ombud/>)



Appendix 1: Common Reactions of Remaining Employees

Employees who remain in the organization (yourself included) will experience a wide range of emotional reactions to the reduction in workforce. These reactions run the gamut of emotions typical of grief: denial, shock, pleading, anger, and finally acceptance. People are in mourning. It is key to remember to consider each individual separately when dealing with employees during this time. Experts refer to many of these reactions as the “Survivor Syndrome.”

Fear, Insecurity, and Uncertainty

People are anxious about the future of their own jobs and are fearing “who’s next?” As a result, there may be an increased self-absorption and a focus on job security where people begin to care less about the future of the organization. Some people who are feeling really scared may choose to work long hours, thinking that then the organization won’t take away their jobs. Some experience confusion about their future role. There may be a tendency to avoid risk taking, due to skepticism around why certain people were let go and why they were retained.

Unfairness, Distrust, and Betrayal

Some may question the credibility of senior management. Others may believe that managers made poor choices in terms of who stayed and who left. Research has shown that perceptions of the “fairness” of a workforce reduction process tend to influence retained employees’ commitment to an organization. Others may not feel safe enough to openly express these emotions within their organization. However, the suppression of these emotions can create further problems. It may be argued that the feelings openly expressed aren’t the ones you really worry about. It is the latent issues of resentment and lack of trust that must be addressed. Trust can be diminished among co-workers and people may become suspicious of management and one another.

Sadness, Depression, and Guilt

Employees are drained and just want it to be over. Some may experience poor health and sleeplessness. Others may experience decreased motivation to work hard. (They perceived that their co-workers worked hard, put many hours in, and “Look what happened to them.”) Some may feel guilty about retaining their jobs while their friends are forced to look for other positions. Others may mask feelings of sadness, stress, helplessness and guilt in order to fit in. They may demonstrate false group bravado or may “hang tough” after a workforce reduction.

Frustration, Resentment, and Anger

Anger is an appropriate feeling for an employee to have. Some retained employees may even feel envious of the people who were terminated. There may be a perception that people received generous layoff packages and were helped to find new jobs. Some may feel resentful of any new work they must now assume from displaced workers.

Optimism/ Continuing Commitment

Some team members may believe that tough actions have been taken and the organization is now on a painful but clear road toward recovery. Not all responses are negative. Some may even feel “charged up”, finding new excitement in their work, challenged by the prospect of “doing more with less” or saving the organization. Others are relieved that they “made the cut.” This may exist particularly where it looks like the DLC is heading in a new direction.