

The Human Sacrifice

Redundancy can be a two-edged sword.
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Counsellor, says lawyers should be fully aware of the
human and corporate implications

In skilled hands, cuts can cure. But applied indiscriminately and insensitively, they may damage the very structure they are meant to protect.

Even in the best scenario, when lawyers are brought into a company to ensure that correct procedures are followed, they may not be privy to the overall picture. At the end of their contract, they may leave again, without ever having been aware of what is going on or of the consequences of the staff cuts which have taken place.

The real cost can be catastrophic. Redundancy can cut a swathe through a workforce, leaving in its wake a trail of despondency, insecurity, and lowered morale. To minimise disruption, management needs to be prepared before the redundancy notices are issued.

The two-edged sword

A major mistake is to think that only the staff being made redundant will be affected. Redundancy affects everyone, directly or indirectly. Those left in employment may be expected to cope with the additional workload and resent the company's resources and attention being steered towards those who are leaving. Yet a management plan can be evolved to address potential problems and create a more positive outcome for the individuals and the parent company.

Changes within an organisation invariably reflects on such issues as –

- job status and content;
- relationships with peers and supervisors;
- working conditions;
- payment.

A need for training

Unskilled handling of redundancy by untrained managers can cause chaos. The absence of clear communication creates an atmosphere of fear in which conjecture and

rumour run riot and anticipation of the consequences may generate serious feelings of resentment.

Ill-informed talk may suggest that an organisation is on the brink of being bought up, sold off, merged, or closed. In the worst cases, a news story will appear in the press before the company employees are informed – with dire consequences.

Fear of the unknown is basic to all resistance to change. The lack of certainty is frightening and the threat of impending redundancy often promotes a feeling of vulnerability. For some, the opportunity of re-employment may seem remote and it is difficult to adjust to the loss of structure and activity.

Yet, once the workforce can be informed of the facts in a clear, but sensitive manner, most of the uncertainty can be resolved in a positive light.

Communicate and demonstrate

Any attempt to help people come to terms with change based on logical argument is invariably ineffective because logic will not have a direct effect on a person's feelings.

This is where the effective use of counselling skills can help, although they must be used in conjunction with practical organisational initiatives.

Even if a cutback or change in the company involves just one or two people in a workgroup of ten, all must be informed of the changes proposed. Communication is required to promote a feeling of security, maintain group co-operation and establish an awareness of the restructured organisation.

The individual response

Humanity does not easily embrace change. Sometimes, the biggest barrier to change is resistance by the managers themselves.

Since each person will respond individually to different circumstances, communication skills are of paramount importance. Some employees may welcome change as an opportunity to achieve new goals while others will not. Paradoxically, often there is a counter-balancing desire for new experiences and other associated gains.

Responses may be coloured by the fear of job loss and associated income and status, as well as altered relationships. Where change requires employees to work different hours, or relocate, then the impact begins to affect their social activities and those of their families.

A hidden agenda

One aspect often overlooked is the adverse effect that redundancy can have on an employee's self-image. Another immediate and devastating result – often ignored – is that redundancy can curtail any desire to complete the work on which the employee is engaged before they leave.

A realistic overview

Job security slid into oblivion with the demise of the twentieth century. A job for life no longer exists. Today, employers work in a different ethos and no-one has a guaranteed future. The hard truth today is that the governing factor in industry and commerce is one of cost effectiveness. Short-term contracts are the norm; long-term employment a luxury. In a world where departments are being outsourced, companies are fearful of being forced to pay compensation, or face litigation, the average employee has no option but to cope with change – and that includes managers. In the short term, organisations may be saving money, yet in the long term, this may prove to be short-sighted if the work is not delivered in an effective and efficient manner.

Facing a future in which cut-backs are part of the accepted business culture, it is imperative that managers receive specialist training in how to run a redundancy programme which includes damage

limitation.

The no-go approach

Some of the insensitive methods meted out in our so-called civilised business sector when handling redundancy are barbaric. Consider the following:

- Employees are handed the 'brown envelope';
- The company runs a video requesting employees pack their belongings if their name does not appear on the screen;
- Personnel are asked to be present at their desks while names are read out over a tannoy system;
- 'Personalised messages' on in-house e-mails inform personnel if they have a job or not.

Handle with care

It is the long-term effects of how a redundancy programme is managed which will be remembered. Handled insensitively, it may take a long time for management to re-establish confidence within the company while the knock-on effect can leave a legacy of a low-motivated, negative – possibly hostile – workforce which can be counter-productive.

Great expectations

An overview of the manager's role in executing redundancies may appear to encompass managerial skills, yet how many managers receive crisis intervention training? Dealing and coping with redundancy comes into this category, and managers cannot be expected to deal with it effectively if they are not given the appropriate preparation and training. Without these skills managers may experience feelings of being let down, a loss of confidence, self-esteem and ultimately a sense of failure. It is worth bearing in mind that it may be the manager who is next in line for redundancy.

In addition, managers will be placed in the difficult position of dealing with their employees whilst secretly harbouring negative feelings of their own. It is these feelings which will need to be addressed and overcome.

Management support

Throughout the redundancy, crisis management must display all the attributes expected of a caring organisation. Simultaneously, they will need to maintain morale to protect productivity and the company image.

The act of selection itself can cause conflict, as managers have to overcome feelings of guilt when making the decision of who stays and who goes. This task may result in the manager feeling frustrated over the timing of the decision and indeed they may disagree with the selection criteria or the

announcement itself.

Don't shoot the messenger!

Redundancy is a trauma inducing feelings similar to a bereavement. As with any loss, the manner in which the news is delivered is of the utmost importance. Receiving bad news is traumatic and care must be taken to present it in the best possible manner. Bearers of bad news experience tremendous stress, so it is imperative that the harbringer receives peer group support and training in managing their own stress levels.

Euphemistically, the word 'redundancy' can be termed downsizing, rightsizing or restructuring. In the end, it still spells job loss. This loss brings with it a plethora of emotions including shock, hurt, disappointment, rejection, confusion and despair which can in turn can lead to an identity crisis. Without the necessary training, managers are simply not equipped to deal effectively in the field of crisis intervention and it is unrealistic for an organisation to believe managers can or should be able to cope.

In order to deal with the issues, managers need time and space to ventilate their feelings.

Pre-planning pays dividends

As with any tactical manoeuvre, redundancy needs careful planning. Time spent looking at the larger picture will help minimise trauma and assist positive continuity after the conflict is over.

It is imperative that consideration is given as to the way the announcement will be made i.e. by whom, to whom, and at what time.

Planning the announcements

Points to note:

- Announcements should be made at the start of the week to allow peer group support for employees who do not have family or friends with whom to share the details;
- Avoid announcements on a Friday or before a Bank/National holiday;
- Train managers never to expect a particular reaction.

It should be remembered that:

- Poor inter-personal skills will inflame a bad situation;
- Managers need a reasonable degree of counselling skills but should refrain from taking on the role of counsellor;
- A skilled manager can turn a bad situation into a manageable one;
- Face-to-face confrontation should be

avoided, especially if the manager cannot listen or empathise.

Listening to employees

- Employees need to be able to tell their story without interruption;
- Managers should be able to focus on the areas of specific difficulties which employees will experience;
- Empathy and support must be given and options offered without pressure or coercion;
- Managers need to stay calm and supportive as well as be able to deal with a wide range of emotional reactions.

The need for support groups

In the arena created by redundancy, both employees and managers need support groups. Managers need a central counselling resource that is able to deal in-depth with those employees who have been deeply traumatised. This resource should be available to those who are made redundant and those who are staying.

Setting up a facility whereby small, mutual-aid groups of redundant employees may meet together with the company's support will help relieve pressure on participants and allow the workforce to view the organisation in a more sympathetic light.

The aftermath

For those employees who stay in the organisation there can be a sense of 'survivor guilt' which manifests itself in feelings of awkwardness, embarrassment and an inability to communicate with colleagues who are leaving. The realism that paternalistic organisations no longer exist can be shattering for all.

When the initial shock has subsided, employees leaving a company may feel anger and resentment in addition to the possible sense of ostracism. They may be disappointed and bewildered by the embarrassment they appear to be causing their own colleagues who find it difficult to converse with them.

The battlefield is a great leveller

No matter how sound the reassurance given by a manager that the company's decision was objective, not personal, very few people will accept this. Being made redundant is personal, and so the effect of the decision will be taken personally.

Skilled managers can help alleviate the traumatic impact, yet one of the best strategies is to allow newly redundant employees sufficient support to enable them to digest the news in their own time.

There are no hard and fast rules on whether