

LEADERSHIP FOR COPING WITH ORGANIZATIONAL DOWNSIZING

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When organizations go through a downsizing process, it is sometimes necessary to layoff staff members as a consequence of reorganization decisions. For many people who are laid off, or anticipate getting laid off, losing their jobs is not only a loss of their source of income, it can also be a loss of self-esteem and professional and/or personal purpose in life. Other staff who are not themselves laid off, are witnesses to their friends' and colleagues' plight. The human psychological and social consequences of a downsizing, therefore, can be impactful to many different people for different reasons.

Two primary management concerns during such a period must be, 1) to assure, to the maximum extent possible, that the organization continues to aggressively pursue its mission and, 2) that staff members are provided with the support they need. These concerns are important for some very important reasons. First, if the organization does not quickly get back on task, the benefits that need to be derived from the reorganization in the first place may not occur and the pain of layoff actions will have gone for naught. Second, getting back to business as fast as possible after a downsizing action is not only good for business, it is also good for people's morale. Periods of duress can be weathered best with a strong sense of purpose and dedication to common goals among all those affected. Successfully coping together with adversity can bind a team together so that the both the individuals and the organization are stronger after the difficult period than they were before.

As an organization confronts the natural human issues associated with a downsizing, those who are in the role of supervisor have special responsibilities. They are the organization's primary resources for getting through the turmoil and renew the spirit and reality of effective performance. It is especially important for them to:

1. To take good care of themselves so their energy and focus can be available on behalf of others in the organization who depend upon them for supervisory support.
2. To maintain a professional and business-like attitude toward the business rationale that is the foundation for the downsizing.
3. To keep staff as fully informed as possible about the downsizing situation, layoff decisions, and relevant organizational policies and procedures that can assist staff members.
4. To provide individual and team support to staff members who remain after the layoff actions have been taken.
5. To provide the leadership that is necessary to recover as quickly as possible from the negative effects of downsizing actions and regain a positive organizational momentum.

As these special tasks were being defined for this paper, they seemed to spontaneously organize themselves into a natural hierarchy:

- First, survive - take care of yourself;
- Second, get your attitude under control and avoid taking business issues personally;
- Third, take care of business by securing and providing the information that is necessary for effective coping and performance;
- Fourth, actively reach out to others who need and expect your support so they can recover maximum health and get back to business themselves;
- Fifth, take charge of the organization's situation and make the changes that are needed to adjust appropriately to the new organizational realities.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

1. Leaders and supervisors need to take good care of themselves so their energy and focus can be available on behalf of others in the organization who depend upon them for supervisory support.

Supervisors catch a lot of heat whether they deserve it or not during downsizings, reorganizations, layoffs and other unpleasant organizational changes. People get angry when their assumptions of security and continuing employment are threatened. They often express that anger, appropriately or not, at their bosses. Being blamed is a universally disliked and stressful experience. Supervisors can, therefore, expect to experience elevated levels of distress during these periods. What does it mean to take care of yourself under these conditions?

First, keep things in perspective. Recognize that there is a stimulus in the environment (the downsizing) that has the ability to generate hostile energy from those affected. They are not wrong to have their feelings and neither are you wrong to have initiated the organizational actions that will help the system get back to healthy functioning. So, avoid accepting the misplaced blame and don't take their expressions of anger personally. Keep in touch with the adage, "this, too, shall pass." Maintain a positive mental outlook about the changes going on and the beneficial effects they will have for the long-term future of the organization. Talk positively both to yourself and others.

Second, if the pressure begins to get to you, take a "time out" to literally catch your breath. Go somewhere private (the restroom?) and do five minutes of deep breathing while relaxing your body. Remember the principle: the mind cannot be anxious when the body is relaxed. If you relax your body through deep breathing and focused relaxation, your mind will become quiet and you will be able to get back to work with a clear head. This exercise is especially useful if discussions become heated. NEVER talk or act from anger. You will nearly always regret it later. Instead, take a "time out" and breathe. Then, when calm, resume the conversation in a problem-solving mode.

Third, remember when you are working in a continuously stressful situation for a period of time, you will have to give special attention to practicing healthy habits for physical, mental, and spiritual balance.

Some tips for physical health: drink lots of water (5 or 6 glasses a day between meals); eat balanced meals; stretch out your muscles and tendons at least once every day; take a minimum of 20 minutes per day of moderate physical exercise (walking, jogging, etc. Do whatever you enjoy and will do consistently.)

Some tips for mental health: keep a positive mental attitude -- look for the opportunity that resides inside every problem (This is not just a naive, Pollyanna suggestion I am making. I'm referring to the exercise of rigorous mental discipline in the self-control of your attitude for which you are responsible.); use logical mental processes and avoid errors in thinking such as overgeneralization, emotional "reasoning," and blaming; create plans, objectives, schedules and follow them with actions; keep your sense of humor and remember to laugh easily.

Some tips for spiritual health: Keep a journal of your thoughts and feelings and review it periodically to maintain perspective; share your feelings and thoughts with someone you trust in order to clarify reality for yourself (do this only for positive benefit and not to indulge in wallowing around in low morale); take time to reflect, take stock, seek new opportunities for yourself and others, and extend yourself on behalf of others; read biographies and other books or articles that will keep your morale high.

PROFESSIONAL BUSINESS-LIKE ATTITUDE

2. Leaders and supervisors need to maintain a professional and business-like attitude toward the business rational that is the foundation for the downsizing.

To help maintain a professional and business-like attitude, familiarize yourself with the rationale for the downsizing and the specific reasons why decisions were taken that affect the staff that report to you. Share this information fully, candidly, and as often circumstances require. Having to repeat this message is not wasteful; it's necessary and appropriate. Do it with patience.

Review the organization's personnel policies and procedures relevant to layoffs and be prepared to work with staff accordingly. Know the rules and use them with maximum fairness. Avoid "changing the rules in the middle of the game" even if the rules aren't as good as they should be. If necessary, acknowledge the rules may need improvement and indicate when, in the future, they will be reviewed and modified. Clearly indicate they will not be changed, however, to suit the immediate convenience of any specific individuals during the current organizational changes. Provide the certainty that the current rules will be applied fairly to everyone until the present situation is resolved.

Be energetic in clarifying the goals and objectives that must be achieved to keep the organization moving and keep yourself and others focused on pursuing those goals.

Write them down on paper, flip charts, posters, calendars, and anywhere else that will keep them in immediate view. Resist the temptation to think and act as if "you will get back to work as soon as things settle down." Getting on with the work of the organization is the quickest way to help it get settled down again, adjusted to the changed circumstances, and performing as it should. It also helps the people in the organization to recover their perspective, focus, self-esteem, and morale. The challenge of pursuing goals is good both for business and for people. Keep bringing your attention, and theirs, back to what it is you're trying to do.

KEEPING STAFF INFORMED

3. Leaders and supervisors need to keep staff as fully informed as possible about the downsizing situation, layoff decisions, and relevant organizational policies and procedures that can assist staff members.

Identify relevant questions and develop informative answers. During times of rapid change and distress, people naturally have an elevated need for credible information. As a supervisor, an important part of your job is to clarify the questions or gaps in information and fill them in with reliable facts, authoritative opinions and judgments, or thoughtful interpretations of events. Avoid misrepresentations or guesses. It's better to say, "I don't know; I'll get back to you with the facts" than to make something up in the hopes that the questioner will go away. Just be sure that you do, in fact, get back to them.

Become familiar with information that is relevant to the layoff and means by which to help staff deal with it. Pay close attention to information given out in meetings and make notes so that accurate information can be passed along to other staff. During times of change, information is often disjointed and given out fast. There is a natural increase in vulnerability to information being misunderstood or miscommunicated. Avoiding miscues and mistaken rumors takes careful attention to detail and timeliness in passing along the facts.

Focus carefully on personnel actions that might have to be taken during layoffs. Work with the affected staff so they are informed and assisted through any transitions that must be handled.

Watch for layoff lists and take the initiative in talking with affected staff. Avoid delays because discussions about layoffs are uncomfortable to deal with. Delay only makes it worse. Set up private meetings to talk through the layoff situation and to provide whatever assistance is possible. It's up to supervisors to extend themselves on behalf of others and not just wait until someone asks for assistance.

PROVIDING INDIVIDUAL AND TEAM SUPPORT

4. Leaders and supervisors need to provide individual and team support to staff members who remain after the layoff actions have been taken.

One of the most important and helpful things a supervisor can do during times of distressing change is to listen with care. Active listening involves giving your full and disciplined attention to another. Even when it is only for as little as 10 minutes, your full and undivided attention can be tremendously impactful and positive.

You can also be helpful by clarifying options, counseling about both facts and feelings, reframing misunderstandings and wrong-headed ideas, and offering encouragement for positive outcomes. Dealing effectively with the natural human needs that occur during difficult times is a key aspect of the supervisor's role.

Staff who are being laid off need support to help them maintain their self esteem, confidence, and ability to seek and find other employment. It is normal for staff members who are confronted with being laid off to go through a difficult process of adjustment. Research and experience indicates that, for people to return as quickly as possible to effective functioning, they need to go through several stages, each of which is important. The stages, and the order in which they typically occur, are: denial, anger, acknowledgment, acceptance, and, ultimately, coping. For reasons that may be obvious, the more quickly people can get to the coping state, the better. It is through coping that positive and healthy adjustment can be achieved. Supervisors can assist staff being laid off to get through these stages as rapidly as possible so the staff member can get on to a new employment situation.

- The way to help with denial is to provide information that is reliable and detailed. Help the staff member to hear it from whom ever they must in order to get past the point of denying that they are going to have to do something different, and fast.
- Help them get through their anger by doing non-defensive listening followed by a repeat description of the real situation and the need for their taking some positive action.
- Help with their acknowledging the situation by confirming that the situation of their layoff is real and that they have to do something creative. Let them know you are there to help in any way you can.
- They can move through the acceptance phase and to coping most readily if the supervisor offers encouragement and support for their planning their next steps and taking the initiative on their own behalf.

Sometimes moving through these stages can take several days and even weeks. Sometimes they're through it in a matter of hours and moving on with dispatch. Each person is different and may need different responses from their supervisor.

Another focus of attention that supervisors must give is to those who are staying. They are the ones who must help to meet the organization's goals in spite of the fact that there

are fewer resources and much more pressure on the system during the change process. Supervisors will help those remaining to be more effective if they bring them together periodically, clarify objectives, share information and facts, answer questions, and listen to their input and be influenced by it. Remember, they talk to each other. They are either sharing good information or bad information in their off-line conversations. Keeping them together as a team, well informed with facts, caring about each other, and focused on common objectives is especially important during the difficult period. Making this happen takes initiative and time. The supervisor has to be the one to give it the priority attention it needs to make it happen and make the time available.

PROVIDING LEADERSHIP

5 . Leaders and supervisors need to provide the direction and support that is necessary to recover as quickly as possible from the negative effects of downsizing actions and regain a positive organizational momentum.

While it is critically important for supervisors to effectively handle the downsizing situation as it is in the current organization, there is another aspect in the situation that also must be considered. Circumstances of organizational stress that require rapid change and adjustment often also offer a chance to change things for the better. In the Chinese book of *I Ching* the symbol for "danger" also means "opportunity." In order for the opportunities to be seized, supervisors must adopt the role of leader. While a "supervisor" is one who works effectively within the boundaries of the system, a "leader" is one who redefines system in new ways and changes the boundaries. People sometimes need to act as supervisors and sometimes as leaders in order to take maximum advantage of difficult organizational times.

Changing the system to a new way of getting things done in light of the downsizing can be a strategy for snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. It takes courage and vision, and the payoffs can be large. A side benefit that will nearly always be enjoyed by a leader who can seize and act on the opportunity inherent in a problem situation is that those who are watching will usually develop a deeper respect for the leader and be willing to act from trust and confidence in order to help make the new situation work.

What actions will leaders take to make positive changes out of difficulty? Here are some of them. Effective leaders will be about:

- Defining the challenges
- Providing the resources and ideas that will help people to meet them successfully
- Recreating and redefining relationships with people both inside and outside the organization based on the new organizational realities after the downsizing and layoff; redefining customers' expectations
- Removing fear and rebuilding trust

- Listening to feedback from all the stakeholders and adjusting the organizational structure and ways-of-work as the new situation matures
- Recognizing and rewarding those who display effectiveness in the new situation

Changes, both beneficial and difficult, are unending. Circumstances never remain the same. In times of growth and success, changes are easier to handle than in times of failure and decline. Either way, it is through the process of coping with change, seizing the opportunities inherent in change for creative leadership, and helping others cope and perform effectively in the midst of turmoil, that builds and eventually defines the character of an organization and its leaders.