



ON TELLING SOMEONE THEY HAVE BEEN LAID OFF....

Every manager who's had to do it will tell you firing people is one of the hardest things they've ever done in their life. Instinctively, we all understand how much of a person's identity is likely to be tied up in his or her work life, and that severing that identity can be devastating.

And when it's happening all over an organization, the general level of anxiety is, of course, through the roof. How people are treated at these moments matters, not just for the person losing their job, but for the ones left behind. If the fired person is shown no dignity, why would the people left behind think that there will be any regard for their dignity going forward? And if you think there's no regard for your dignity and self-respect in the place you're working, how likely is it that you'll do good work?

Here's a guide to telling someone they've been fired that will help you preserve your integrity and their identity during a very painful moment. And reassure the rest of the organization that people – you and each of them – do matter.

1.) **Plan for your conversation.** Before meeting with an individual you are about to lay off, review his or her records. At what has s/he been consistently strong? At what has s/he been consistently weak? Are there places where, in your assessment, he or she has capacities that haven't been

developed? Skills? Especially when the person is a manager, he or she has obviously been promoted because of some significant strengths. Identify these for them in a thoughtful and caring way.

- 2.) Acknowledge that this is a painful conversation. **Do not hide that it is difficult for you as well.** Much of the research on resilience after being fired confirms that believing that your boss genuinely cared is one of the key factors in how quickly people bounce back and get on with their lives. Similarly, the people left behind suffer less “survivor syndrome” if they believe their managers cared about the people they were firing.
- 3.) Remind them that this is has been a skill-set based process, and, ***if they're able to listen***, share your observations of strengths and weaknesses. Be specific and behavioral in describing both. Recognize that some people may not be able to hear this sort of information, and others may be hungry for it. Be sure you're wording their problem areas in ways that motivate them to work on them going forward, not as character flaws. Encourage them strongly to look for new opportunities that play to their strengths.

- 4.) If you can do it in a heartfelt way, thank them for whatever number of years of service they've given the organization. Be specific in recognizing their contributions – and aware that they may respond bitterly – “well, if it was such great service, why are you firing me?” The best answer is that their skills and the organization's needs are no longer a good fit. Do not get into an argument about the details – it won't help them. You can gently decline to have that conversation.
- 5.) Offer whatever support you genuinely feel you could provide –contacts, information about opportunities outside of the organization, etc. Suggest that they use their reviews as a written form of reference. **Don't make promises you know you won't keep!**
- 6.) If you're comfortable with it, check in with the person periodically. Make a tickler note to yourself to give them a call, at say 4-6 weeks, and 12 weeks. Not to commiserate, but just to say you'd been thinking about them and hoping they were doing well.
- 7.) As a species, humans are designed to find touch a source of comfort. Close

the meeting with at least a moment of physical contact – handshake, hug, pat on the shoulder as appropriate. This is hardly the time to give a non-verbal message that “you're untouchable” to someone.

- 8.) Decide what you need to say to the employees who are remaining, who will in many cases be quite upset, having lost a manager and/or a colleague. You may want to say something like:

“This has been very difficult. Many of us had close relationships with the folks let go, enjoyed working with them and will miss them. Clearly we had people who had contributed to our organization for a long time and certainly were not slouches as employees. However, our reaction to our current and projected business conditions meant we needed to create a more nimble organization which required making some very hard choices.”

Be sure you have a plan in place for how they are to proceed – what responsibilities have been rearranged, who they are to report to, etc.

With thanks to Noury Al-Khaledy and Mark Shipman for their ideas and suggestions.