

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE: KEEPING LAYOFF SURVIVORS ENGAGED

In her nearly 14 years at a Silicon Valley semiconductor company, Sue Hansen (not her real name) has lived through six layoffs, two of them within the last five months.

Each time she knew – or had a feeling – it was going to happen.

Each time she agonized for days before the actual event, wondering whether this time her name was “on the list.”

Each time she survived.

While this would seem to evoke a sense of relief, for Sue, and other survivors like her, initial relief is followed by anxiety, loss, fear and even guilt. “Why not me?” “Will I be next?” “How will we get the work done without the people who are gone?”

As the number of layoffs increases – more than two million jobs were lost in the first quarter of 2009 – so do the ranks of the survivors and the emotional and often physical effects on those survivors.

Most companies spend weeks or even months planning a layoff, ensuring – as much as they can – that departing employees are provided with information, tools and resources to help with their transition *out*. Few companies, however, make as much effort to help survivors with their transition *in*, which often involves increased workload, reduced hours and/or pay, job change, reduced perks and other changes.

How companies treat the survivors during this transition period will mean the difference between keeping those employees when things turn around and losing them to other companies.

Here are some simple things companies can do to keep their layoff survivors engaged, productive and loyal.

- ◆ **Acknowledge the loss.** Recognize that employees are grieving for the loss of their work family unit – the friends and co-workers they saw every day, perhaps for years. Realize for some this may mean their “go to” person is gone. Encourage managers to seek out opportunities to provide a sounding board for employees who need to talk.
- ◆ **Don’t take the attitude “they should just be happy to have a job.”** No doubt, they are. But they are also probably having to adjust to a bigger or different workload, a different team, downscaled perks and other changes that take some time to deal with.
- ◆ **Communicate early and often.** Let employees know what’s changing and why. Explain what steps are being taken to prevent future layoffs. Show that “we’re all in this together.” Share with them the sacrifices the management team is making.

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- ◆ **Continue employee development.** If there are limited funds for training, be creative. Develop a mentoring program to share knowledge. Organize brown bags, blogs, wikis and other knowledge sharing media using internal resources.
- ◆ **Build your bench strength.** As the economy turns around – and it will – your competitive advantage will be based in large part on the strength of your leadership. Enlist your current management team to mentor the next line of leaders. Demonstrate to employees that there is hope and a place for them to grow.
- ◆ **Continue to give performance reviews** – even if you can't give raises. Employees need to know how they're doing. Too often when companies have to freeze salaries they also put feedback on ice. Don't. Continue to give feedback – both positive and developmental – to keep employees engaged, connected and productive.
- ◆ **Ensure that communication is two-way.** Listen – with both your ears and eyes to what the “left behind” employees are feeling. Encourage managers to continue – or initiate – one-on-one meetings with their employees to listen empathically and show they care.
- ◆ **Make employees an integral part of the turnaround plan.** Seek out their ideas. Create a “great idea” program. Acknowledge ideas contributed and reward ideas implemented.
- ◆ **Do whatever it takes to maintain the company culture.** One of the key reasons people choose a company – and stay at a company - is because of its culture. Think about what defines your culture and makes sure that doesn't get lost in the wake of downsizing.

Layoff survivors need to know that their employer has a vision for the future of the company, and that *they* are included in that vision. Otherwise, when recruiters start calling again, those survivors will pick up the phone.

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“I think re-engineering or restructuring or downsizing or rightsizing or whatever you want to call it, it's basically firing, has gone way too far. Employees, as I've talked to them across the country, feel that they are not respected, they are not valued, they are worried about their jobs. They simply feel that the company is no longer loyal to them. Why should they be loyal to the company, they ask me. Why should I go the extra mile? Why should I care?”

Robert Reich

Former Secretary of Labor

“Who comes first? Don't be silly, says King Hal; it's employees. That is -- and this dear Watson, is elementary -- if you genuinely want to put customers first, you must put employees more first.”

Tom Peters
THE PURSUIT OF “WOW”