

What About the Surviving Employees?

What happens to the employees who remain after a reduction in the workforce? Most employers do a good job of providing a safety net to the laid-off employees including, counseling, outplacement, extension of benefits, etc. However, an organization cannot forget about the tremendous psychological effects staff reductions have on surviving employees.



Reactions “Survivors” Might Have:

- **Anxiety:** They may be worried they are the next to go, waiting for the “other shoe to fall.” They have experienced a trauma in which they feared for their jobs and their ability to provide for their families.
- **Guilt:** Some employees may feel guilty that they stayed, while others who desperately needed a job had to go.
- **Depression:** Surviving employees may become depressed when friends and coworkers lose their jobs. There is a significant change in their social network and work team. The loss of those coworkers can be upsetting.
- **Lack of Motivation:** The internal energy of employees can be depleted by the downsizing. Talented employees who invested lots of effort into the organization may now be gone. This can have the effect of decreasing the motivation for surviving employees to invest their energy. Also, believing that they may never see pay increases or benefits for their hard work due to budget restrictions can further reduce motivation.
- **Uncertainty and Confusion:** Surviving employees may be uncertain about how reduced staff will handle heavier work loads. They may feel uncertainty, resentment and confusion about their responsibilities or what is expected of them as they are asked to handle the workloads of former employees.
- **Me not We:** When the working environment is insecure, employees often move self-preservation to the top of their agenda. The basic need for security has been threatened, and employees will be highly concerned with protecting their jobs and their ability to provide for their families.
- **Leaving:** Some employees may leave physically, deciding to pursue something different or more stable. Other employees may stay with the organization, but “leave” mentally, becoming less involved and less satisfied with the work - “resigning” while staying on the job.

What you can do to help Survivors:

- # **Communicate as soon as possible** - As soon as there are any facts about reduction, announce them, even in a general way.

- # **Communicate why** - Not everyone will be happy about the news, however, organizations want their employees to know that what they are doing is the best course of action based on alternatives. Therefore, it's important to take people through the alternatives management had to consider. This may help people come to the same conclusion about the reduction necessity.
- # **Communicate the plan** - Organizations want the employees to know they have their best interests at heart. Convey the long-range plan, and that the plan may change in response to external factors. The more this plan is shared with employees, the more comfortable they will be with the decisions that affect them.
- # **Time to Grieve** - Give opportunities for both "leavers" and "survivors" to deal with endings. Reducing the workforce disrupts relationships, and one of the reactions to these changes is grief. Encourage openness and honesty, and allow employees to express the feelings that accompany the grieving process.
- # **Retraining and Support** - Provide opportunities for training and support for survivors who must assume new functions and a greater workload.
- # **Be Visible** - Throughout the reduction process be visible to your employees. Make yourself available for communication, showing your concern for the struggles of surviving employees. Provide updates, even when there is no news.
- # **Gather Information** - Talk to remaining staff to identify important issues. This can be done informally with local management. Measure the damage to morale and involve staff in brainstorming ways to handle the workload, move forward, or work together better.
- # **Stress Value and Future** - Recognize individual employees' unique contributions to the organization. Express appreciation. Talk with employees about the organization's vision for the future of doing business and how surviving employees can benefit from it. Enhance survivors' feelings of self-worth and security.
- # **Involve Employees** - Involve the workforce in team brainstorming and other problem-solving activities. This not only stimulates creativity, but rebuilds relationships and can increase involvement and morale. The more employees are involved in regrouping, the less likely they will feel like victims.
- # **Be Patient** - Even after changes have occurred, human transitions take time. No matter what you do, the workplace atmosphere may remain a little hairy for a while. Provide plenty of coaching and support to help survivors become re-established physically and emotionally in the "new" organization.