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I saw on the news recently where some French employees from Sony took their management hostage. I turned up the volume and heard the newscaster relay that the employees were angry because they didn't like the way their layoff had been handled. That caught my ear. They were not protesting the layoff itself, but the way it was handled.

Most of us get it. Gone are the days where a 30 or 40 year career with one company was possible. We have but to watch the nightly news to see that anyone could be laid off. And when this happens, employees want to be treated humanely and respectfully; not told by email and not treated like cases in a legal folder that need to be 'handled.'

As an EAP professional, I have been in and out of hundreds of companies over the years and have seen some conscientious and thoughtful layoff practices

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along the way. Savvy organizations are aware of the statistics suggesting that less than half of downsized companies achieve the desired reduction in company expenditures they hope for. So they don't turn easily toward the option of layoff. They face economic and market challenges by doing everything possible to develop alternatives and prevent it from happening in the first place. And, if these endeavors do not work, they have at least built some credibility with their employees through their avoidance efforts.

Planning a layoff should not be solely relegated to Human Resources. Rather, form a cross representative committee in order to gain advantage of the varied perspectives and creative input from staff from all levels of the business. The committee's first task should be to appoint communication representatives for each work area. The rumor mill will definitely crank up and it will be advantageous to communicate the process, clarify misconceptions, facilitate Q&A venues and be aware of personnel who may need personal attention during this time of uncertainty. A public PR person should also be elected to handle news media and customer and vendor inquiries and concerns.

Next, develop a post layoff restructure plan. Many companies fail at downsizing because they do not consider the many facets of their enterprise. Job descriptions alone do not capture all that an individual contributes. What committees, teams, projects, plans, etc. are at play? What institutional knowledge might be lost? Developing a restructure plan will also aid in the layoff selection process. Selection should be based on employment redundancies, departmental or project cuts, etc. Selecting individuals labeled as 'deadwood' is ineffective because key positions could be targeted. And, there should be a process in place to address performance issues all along.

Allocate a healthy budget for outplacement services, EAP services and any other community referral options available. Scrimping on these supportive measures could burn bridges and when the economy strengthens, many laid off personnel may be sought after for return. Consider long-term security services as well. Often a security plan is made for the day of the layoff, but there remains the possibility that in 6 or 8 weeks a laid off individual may get their car re-possessed and come back looking for someone to blame.

Relaying the news to those selected is probably the hardest part of downsizing and should be done by those close to employees; their managers. Preparing these managers is key. "What do I say?" is the number one question asked. Coaching for various scenarios like anger, hurt, silence, bargaining, crying or even threats will help managers facilitate this crucial meeting. Debriefing with them afterwards is also good practice and can prepare them for what lies ahead.

When the downsizing is complete, its effects are not over. They may last for months or even years. Leaders should be aware of the signs and symptoms of Layoff Survivor Sickness. Being visible, holding debriefing sessions for remaining personnel along with promotion of EAP support services can help ease anxieties as individuals adjust. Investment in and commitment to these remaining personnel is imperative. Due to additional or unfamiliar work, anxiety and uncertainty, some employees may unexpectedly leave on their own accord.

Layoffs are painful for all involved. But a thorough and humane plan that includes 'before, during and after' components can make all the difference. When the economy does turn around, downsized organizations that have streamlined and invested in their personnel will be positioned for success.