

Successfully Facilitating a Group Reduction in Force

When a company has to let go of a group of employees, the focus needs to be on an orderly transition, internally and externally. HR and management both play critical roles to make the transition as smooth as possible.

There is so much to think about and do when facilitating a reduction in force or RIF, so here are some lessons learned from the trenches:

Conducting the Reductions

- Consider the pros and cons of delivering the message individually, in small groups, or in one large group. What can you realistically manage? How skilled is the messenger? How important is it that the group hears the same message at the same time? Decide which approach will be best for your organization. Individual meetings are more personal and private, but after you have met with one or two individuals, word gets around and others are fearful of what is coming. A group meeting allows for message control—all affected employees hear the same thing.
- Determine which company representatives will be involved and who will deliver the message. This is not an easy job. The right person is likely a company leader who can handle this level of employee relations matter. He or she must be brief, concise, and compassionate. Speak to the business need for the decision. Have a script. All parties need to know what can and cannot be said and done. For example, make no promises. Don't get sidetracked by how badly you feel. Keep the focus on the message and those losing their employment. If the messenger starts to wander off script, HR must step in.
- Stock the meeting room with boxes of facial tissue. Have water available as needed. Watch for emotional employees—some will react quietly, almost stunned; others will be angry. Manage each, and have people ready to make a resource call if an emergency occurs. If someone gets up to leave, do not try to detain him/her. Details can be conveyed later, and the information packet can be mailed.
- After the termination message is delivered, indicate the resources available to them. Some employee assistance programs (EAPs) extend services to terminated employees, so contact your provider, before any meetings, to confirm availability. Depending on your EAP, it may be possible to arrange for one of their representatives to be on-site during the terminations.
- Providing informational handouts and being clear on the employees' next steps are key. Because the terminated employee may not hear anything beyond, "you have lost your job," provide an individualized information packet that includes a copy of the termination letter, how to file for unemployment, EAP information (if available), COBRA information, retirement plan distribution forms/information, payroll information, last paycheck, payout of any accrued time, etc., and contact information if he or she has questions.
- If the state Job Center/Workforce Development Center offers programs and other resources to help displaced staff, include this information in the packet.
- If applicable, provide information about severance and/or outplacement/career transition services to those who may receive them. A business decision may have been made to offer services to some and not others, so you want to be careful about how you communicate that message. For those employees receiving outplacement services, consider having an outplacement representative on site to introduce the services and encourage the "next steps" in beginning the service.
- Consider the pros and cons of employees staying after the announcement to gather personal items. Will this work in your environment or do you need to have employees take their most needed items, i.e., car keys, cell phones, etc., and mail other personal contents to their home address? If you choose to mail personal items, verify their home address. If you will permit employees to gather personal belongings the same day, have boxes or bags available for departing employees. Consider if you need to remind employees that they are not to take anything business related, e.g., files, documents, reports, etc. Document company-issued items that have been returned before leaving, such as cell phones, laptops, tools, or other equipment. If employees do remove company property, remember that you may not withhold an employee's pay until the property is returned.

- If possible, don't let employees congregate in the parking lot or return to the building. Evaluate whether entrance locks need to be changed. Consider how easy it is for a disgruntled former employee to re-enter the building. If you leave entrance doors unlocked, do you need to tighten your practice, especially after hours or for third shift?
- If you have concerns about possible violence, consider hiring security guards to be in the building and/or outside in the parking lot. Be very clear on the role that security will play—cover this with the vendor so that mutual expectations are known. You can also try alerting the police department in your community regarding this action. The response will vary by municipality; some will offer extra drive-bys, and others may not be able to offer additional resources.

After the Reductions – Remaining Staff and Follow-Up

Effective communication about the reduction with those remaining staff is critical. If you can honestly say this is the full extent of the layoff and no one else will be impacted, do so. Employees will want to know. Script Q&As, so you can be prepared to address questions that may arise from remaining employees. Consider the following:

- Possible concerns of the remaining employees may relate to, “Why did she/he have to go?” or “Am I next?”
- Hold meetings immediately after the layoff. Do not discuss specifics, but rather give a concise, straightforward answer, such as “Part of the operations department has been permanently laid off.”
- Announce any alterations in the reporting structure, workload, supervisory assignments, shift changes, etc. Convey that this may cause some changes, but that you are counting on everyone's continued professionalism.
- Employees may have guilty feelings—survivors' remorse. It will be difficult for some employees to accept the loss of their coworker friends. Offer the EAP to all remaining employees, if available.
- Remaining employees may want to talk about the issue and assure themselves that the laid-off employees have been taken care of by the company. They may feel better knowing that the laid-off employees received a severance package and outplacement services (no specifics).
- Once the internal healing has begun, work on the external communication process. If former employees had business relationships outside the company, it is important to contact customers, vendors, and support services to inform them of the recent organizational changes. Provide the new contact's name, department, phone number, and email address. Assure them that your company is doing everything to provide continuity of service.
- Monitor the atmosphere, both internally and externally. Any concerns that surface should be dealt with quickly and professionally. Encourage managers to be more visible. They should find opportunities to connect with employees and ask how they are doing after the RIF.

Taking the time to carefully plan and execute a group reduction in force will make the process easier for those who are conducting the reductions and for the affected employees. With good preparation, the process is likely to be smoother, and the departing employees are more likely to feel they were treated with compassion.