



After the Layoff:

HOW ARE YOU FEELING?

Human resource professionals lavish so much attention on employees during layoffs that they sometimes forget to care for themselves.

By Adrienne Fox

Every HR professional has a story to tell about a layoff. Good ones, bad ones and truly heartbreaking ones. Conducting layoffs has become just another part of HR professionals' jobs, although not the best part. Veterans say it never gets easy to stand in front of a group of employees or look someone in the eye and say, "We have to let you go."

In these dour economic times, you may have just said those words—or may need to in the near future. In July, employers took 1,512 mass layoff actions, resulting in 151,171 separations. The January-to-July layoff figures in 2008 were the highest since 2003, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

Newspapers and business publications read like a veritable roll call of layoffs—20,000 here, 1,000 there, 80 there. The news may read like cold numbers to those not directly affected by reductions in force. But for HR professionals, each number represents a colleague, a contributor or a friend.

Remember, "this is part of your job, no matter how much you dislike it," says Laurence Miller, Ph.D., a psychologist and author of *From Difficult to Disturbed: Understanding and Managing Dysfunctional Employees* (AMACOM, 2007). "It's

The author is a freelance business writer and editor in Alexandria, Va., and contributing editor and former managing editor of HR Magazine.

Heed the Warnings

Psychologists Hap LeCrone, Ph.D., and Laurence Miller, Ph.D., say HR professionals should seek professional help if the following behavioral changes persist following a layoff:

- Trouble sleeping.
- Severe changes in appetite—eating too much or too little.
- Severe depression.
- Irrational guilt about the layoff.
- Not wanting to go to work in the morning.
- Trouble with relationships at home or at work.
- Feeling distracted or anxious.
- Low motivation or avoiding tasks.
- Prolonged stress.

just like a pilot who has to deal with a failed engine or a police officer who has to deal with a shooting incident. When you take on the job of HR, you have to prepare for the likelihood of this happening.”

Shared Pain

It may be particularly disheartening today because finding a new job takes longer than in the past. The average duration of unemployment rose nearly two weeks to 17.5 weeks from June 2007 to June 2008, according to the BLS.

Human resource professionals say they have one constant in getting through the painful task of conducting layoffs: each other. Commiserating with HR colleagues and other senior managers serves as one of the best emotional releases, psychologists say.

HR professionals also remind themselves that, in most cases, the layoffs were beyond their control—perhaps resulting from a downturn in the economy, an external event that hit one industry particularly hard or a change in business strategy. They turn to factors they can control: taking good care of those walking out the door. It gives them solace knowing they did what they could to prepare and help each employee make the transition to a new job.

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—David Schwartz,
D N Schwartz and
Co., New York



But even with preparation, the internal pep talks about how they couldn't have prevented the layoff, and the good treatment of employees with severance and training, the act still takes an emotional toll. Psychologists involved in helping companies through employee assistance programs (EAP) have seen HR professionals worn down by the process.

Miller puts the feeling in simple terms: “No matter what, someone is going to hate your guts.”

Feelings

To be sure, the person losing his way of life, career and, sometimes, identity suffers the most when a layoff occurs. But after a layoff, you need to make sure you're OK, too.

Libby Sartain, SPHR, has experienced layoffs from all angles—being laid off, delivering the news, helping others deal

with the aftermath and making the difficult decision that layoffs are necessary.

Having been laid off herself helped and hurt when it came to conducting layoffs, says Sartain, who served as chief people officer at Yahoo and Southwest Airlines, and who is now retired. “It helped because I knew

what they were going through and could be compassionate. But it hurt because I knew how painful it is. Even though this is a business decision, it feels personal to the person laid off.”

David Schwartz, founder of D N Schwartz and Co. in New York, a retained executive search firm, spent most of his career at Goldman Sachs, serving as vice president of HR during 2000-02, when the firm laid off 120 of its 600 investment bankers. Schwartz was involved in the process and helped deliver the news to individuals.

“I never got used to it,” Schwartz says about delivering the news. “It's horrible. In the situation where the general business landscape is bad, it's unlikely that these people will find jobs. You know it's going to take a year or so no matter how helpful you try to be.”

Patricia Mathews, a member of the Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) Employee Relations Special Expertise Panel, describes the stages her mind goes through before, during and after a layoff. She has been involved in layoffs at Occidental Petroleum's subsidiary OxiChem in western New York during the early 1980s, at Anheuser-Busch in St. Louis from 1983-95 and at Argosy Gaming Co. in Alton, Ill., from 1996-98.

“Initially, your total focus is professional and structured and intellectual. Your mind goes there so you don't have to think about it,” says Mathews, now president of Workplace Solutions, an HR consulting firm in St. Louis. “Then you start to think about the humanity, and you make sure the severance is good and the services are there. You are still in business mode.”

She takes a deep breath before continuing. “And then there's the day you have to deliver the news, and that's the day that the emotional stress comes in. Everyone's nervous—the employees and senior management—because you don't know what to expect.”

But, for Mathews, the buildup to the layoff event proves less stressful than the day after, when your focus turns to your own emotions. “You know it's a part of your job, and you tell yourself that and that you've made it the least painful possible,” she says. “But in the back of your mind, the reality is: There are people who no longer have jobs, and they have families. You

Largest Announced Job Cuts

July 2007-July 2008

Company, division or business sector	Reason	Number of layoffs planned
General Motors, hourly workers	voluntary layoffs	19,000
California Department of Education	cost-cutting	14,000
Countrywide Financial Corp., mortgage	demand downturn	12,000
Electronic Data Systems	early retirement	12,000
Starbucks Corp.	closing	12,000
Verizon Wireless	market conditions	10,000
BP PLC	closing	9,950
Bennigan's Restaurants, Metromedia Restaurants	bankruptcy	9,300
JPMorgan Chase & Co., Bear Stearns	acquisition and merger	9,160
Citigroup, credit collapse	market conditions	9,000
Chrysler LLC	demand downturn	8,500
Bank of America, Countrywide	acquisition and merger	7,500
American Home Mortgage Investment Corp., subprime	demand downturn	7,000
American Airlines	market conditions	7,000
NASA	cost-cutting	7,000
Citigroup Inc., investment banking jobs	market conditions	6,500
Wachovia, credit collapse	market conditions	6,350
First Magnus Financial Corp., mortgage	demand downturn	6,000
DHL, ABX Air	restructuring	6,000
New York City Government Summer Jobs	cost-cutting	6,000
Schering-Plough Corp.	cost-cutting	5,500
General Motors Corp.	voluntary severance	5,200
Wyeth	restructuring	5,000
Johnson & Johnson	restructuring	4,800
Bristol-Myers Squibb Co.	competition	4,800
Movie Gallery Inc.	closing	4,680
AT&T, management	restructuring	4,650
Lennar Corp., housing downturn	demand downturn	4,412
Wachovia, credit collapse, inactive positions	market conditions	4,400
Citigroup Inc.	market conditions	4,200
Sprint Nextel	demand downturn	4,000

get this guilt, and you second-guess what could have been done to avoid the layoff.”

For Mathews, the period of emotional letdown has lasted as long as six months. That was the case with the mass layoff she conducted at OxiChem in the 1980s, where she had to cut 3,000 people—half of the workforce—most of whom had been with the company for 20 years.

Psychologists say if such emotions become excessive or persistent, it's time to seek professional help.

Be Prepared

Knowing what to expect from employees' reactions can help HR professionals deal with the heightened anxiety common with layoffs.

“Being prepared will help HR people with their own feelings of guilt,” says Hap LeCrone, Ph.D., a psychologist in Waco, Texas, and executive director of the Lake Shore Center for

► Online Resources

Talk to your peers regarding how you feel about conducting layoffs in an online discussion featured on *HR Magazine's* home page. For this and a comprehensive collection of links to resources on layoffs and managing during an economic downturn, see the online version of this article at www.shrm.org/hrmagazine.

Psychological Services, a facility that provides EAP services.

When LeCrone is contracted by a company to help employees with the emotional aftermath of a layoff, he often will meet with the HR staff beforehand to discuss their concerns. “They are often fearful that people will come unraveled when they tell them the news or will become physically or verbally abusive,” he says. “The HR manager wants tools to help deal with that. We discuss the variables that could happen and how to deal with each.”

LeCrone will often be on-site when the message is delivered to a group of people. He keeps an eye out for body language—a person whose jaw tightens up, or someone who verbalizes to the person next to him or who gets up and storms out. “I'm there during and after to deal with anyone who acts out,” says LeCrone. “That takes the pressure off HR. I tell them how to spot those people who continue to cry and are having a terrible reaction and look despondent or start throwing up in the bathroom.”

Relying on Others

After HR professionals announce the layoff to employees and move out of the “business mode” mentality, they must take a moment to decompress with colleagues.

LeCrone advises HR professionals and surviving managers to come together in private soon after the layoff announcement to commiserate and learn how others are coping. In that privacy, those

who have been through it before can help less experienced HR managers or supervisors. “The older dogs can help the younger ones know what to expect or if a reaction is normal,” says LeCrone. “Find out how others are dealing, whether it is working out, taking days off or using the EAP.”

Throughout the process, keep an eye out for signs of stress on your colleagues. “Quite a few times, I saw the stress become too much for my staff,” recalls Mathews. “I would tell them to go home early or take a few days off and to come talk to me if they need to. The younger staff, especially, are surprised that it affects them the way it does.”

Paul Gibson, SPHR, GPHR, chief human resource officer at Mattamy Homes in Toronto, warns of the “Norm” syndrome, referring to the episode in the television sitcom “Cheers” where Norm was given the responsibility of firing others in his company because he was empathetic and a good listener. Similarly, Gibson noticed that his manager of organizational effectiveness and talent acquisition Teresa Senisi had become

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—Paul Gibson, SPHR, GPHR, Mattamy Homes, Toronto



Norm. “She is so good at presenting the story, helping people understand and getting them past the grief that she has become the person who everyone wanted to deliver the news,” he says. Senisi is typically a positive person, he adds, but “I started to see a change in her, and I had to offload some of that responsibility.”

Miller advises checking in with people you trust for an objective look at your demeanor and asking if they see changes in your behavior and outlook. Mathews’ husband serves in that role. “He will see the emotional stress on me before I do, and he will reassure me and support me, and that helps,” she says.

Outplacement counselors, hired to help employees transition into new jobs, can also be a valuable, objective resource for HR professionals. OxiChem and Anheuser-Busch brought in outplacement companies whose staff helped the HR teams by reassuring them that they had done a good job, says Mathews. “They’re used to coaching and counseling, and they’ve seen it all before.”

Gibson, who has conducted layoffs for previous employers,

puts the events in perspective for his staff. “I remind people that we aren’t doing the worst thing ever. We’re not killing baby seals. And we get a chance to demonstrate respect and dignity through our humane process.”

More Than the Ax

“Respect” and “dignity” come up often when talking to HR professionals about layoffs. Once the business decision is made, they want to make sure people have the necessary tools to land on their feet. Indeed, creating a compassionate process helps HR deal with the guilt and grief of a layoff.

HR professionals need “to feel they have more to offer than simply the ax,” says LeCrone. “If the HR person knows the company is providing outplacement services and EAP, it alleviates some of the stress.”

Taking control has helped Gibson, a member of the SHRM Employee Relations Special Expertise Panel. “Yes, this is a dark thing we have to do, but it is also an opportunity,” he says. “You can conduct the layoff with dignity and compassion and have pride in the process you helped create to help employees find other positions.”

Even having a say in seemingly minor details can help—like what day of the week you give the news. “Do layoffs on a Monday or Tuesday morning, not on a Friday,” explains Mathews. “If you do it on a Friday, the [separated employee] has the whole weekend to stew and he can’t begin to look for a job until Monday.”

Schwartz agrees and adds, “We didn’t march people out of the office. We gave everyone a week or so to sort things out. We gave them three or four months in an off-site office to do a job search.”

Being as humane as possible helps HR professionals stay connected to departing workers. “I count as personal friends and business colleagues a number of people I let go, largely because the firm had a very civilized approach to layoffs,” says Schwartz.

The Incomprehensible

Civilized was not the word Daisy Wong used to describe her employer’s layoff process. She worked as a graphics designer for a clothing manufacturer near San Francisco from November 2007 to last March when she was cut during the second of three rounds of layoffs.

“It would have been better to do it all at once rather than piecemeal,” says Wong, who asked that her real last name not be used. “After the first one, you think, ‘Oh, OK, they want to cut back.’ But then there’s another round and then another, and you think, ‘Couldn’t they have planned this better?’”

The process also differed from one round to the next. “In

Empathy Point Person

Teresa Senisi is empathetic and a good listener, and she knows how to walk terminated employees through the dark process and on to the other side where opportunities lie, according to her boss, Paul Gibson, chief human resource officer at Mattamy Homes in Toronto. As



Teresa Senisi

manager of organizational effectiveness and talent acquisition, Senisi welcomes the kudos but knows it comes at a price to be the one who represents HR during dark days.

“Layoffs and terminations are a part of the career we signed up for, but it definitely takes an emotional toll,” says Senisi. “Because I’ve become the go-to person to be in on the termination meeting, the perception of employees is that this is all I do. So, no matter what office I go into, even if I’ve never been a part of a termination in that office, the perception is that the angel of death is here. But I also see it as an opportunity to take that talent for empathy and transfer it to other things I can do well to build relationships with internal customers.”

LAYOFF SAGAS

Many HR professionals share one common experience during layoffs: a stream of intensely personal stories from employees. Even many years later, such stories can have a lasting effect.

"I had a gentleman come in my office and just cry," recalls Patricia Mathews, when she worked in an outplacement center during the layoffs at OxiChem in the early 1980s. Now president of HR consulting firm Workplace Solutions, she remembers that "His wife had multiple sclerosis and needed full-time care. He couldn't leave her to look for a job but couldn't afford a nurse any longer. So, we had him bring in his wife to the outplacement center so my staff could watch her two mornings a week while he went on interviews."

'Why Can't It Be You?'

Mathews also remembers bearing the brunt of workers' anger. "The anger and blame are directed at you, or they will say, 'Why can't it be you? What does HR do anyway?' I just sit and listen and then try to get them to look at it as an opportunity," she says. "Several years later, I would run into one of them at a business function, and I would work up the courage to talk to them. In every case, they said they were

angry at me but that it was the best thing that could have happened to them."

David Schwartz, former vice president of HR at Goldman Sachs and founder of retained executive search firm D N Schwartz and Co., remembers a near-death moment with a Goldman Sachs investment banker laid off in the early 2000s. Before being laid off, the banker asked his supervisor if he was on a layoff list. The manager responded, as he was coached, that this was a difficult time and no one's job was safe. "The banker went home and had a heart attack. It turned out that he was scheduled to be let go. He was out of the office for three weeks and was back in the office for three weeks before we felt comfortable telling him. Everyone felt terrible about that."

Jerome Carter, senior vice president of human resources at International Paper, remembers when the company closed a mill where he had worked as an HR manager 10 years earlier. "Seeing a list of names of people I'd worked with brought it home. These were people who had contributed to my success and advancement"

Libby Sartain, SPHR, now retired, recalls working in benefits administration during a layoff early in her career. "There was a man

getting up every morning and putting on a suit and not telling his wife," she recalls. "He would go to the library and hang out. I guess he thought he would find a job before his severance ran out and then tell his wife, 'Hey, I found a new job.' I said, 'You have to tell her.' He finally told her, but it took him a good year before he found a new job."

A Little Minor Relief

But there are good stories, too. Paul Gibson, chief human resource officer of Mattamy Homes in Toronto, points out that you will often hear from employees who have been laid off—something that rarely happens when you fire someone. "When you do mass terminations well, you get daily feedback when they land on their feet," he says.

Mathews remembers one employee, a maintenance director, who had a stutter but was an outstanding worker. He couldn't get past first interviews because of his stutter. So, Mathews called the chief executive officer of a company where the man was interviewing and convinced the CEO to be patient through the interview. The CEO agreed, and the maintenance director got a job. A month later, the CEO called Mathews to thank her.

the first round, the people laid off had to leave that day," she says. "In my round, I had one week's notice and my severance was small because I was just hired. In the third round, no one got severance and they had to leave that day."

Wong doesn't understand why she was hired in November only to be laid off a few months later. She even remembers a new colleague who saw her supervisor laid off on the new employee's first day on the job. "It doesn't seem like there was much foresight or planning from HR," she says.

It's Your Job

The need for workforce planning, including a recovery strategy, represents the biggest lesson for HR professionals conducting layoffs: "The company has a business need or you wouldn't need a layoff," says Sartain. "So, you have to ask the questions about workplace planning. Sometimes, executives will suggest [cutting] 10 percent of the workforce, but that might not be the best strategy. The tendency is to cut all your bottom performers, but sometimes that means you get rid of a job you really need."

Needing to fill positions you have just eliminated doesn't make the layoff seem well-planned and doesn't help with survivor morale. "A layoff challenges you to make sure that the decision you made is the right one because you don't want to do it and then have to bring people back," says Jerome Carter, senior vice president of human resources at International Paper in Memphis, Tenn. "These decisions shouldn't be made if they're not sound business logic."

No matter how emotionally draining, a layoff may be necessary for the company—and its surviving employees—to thrive. Make sound business judgments, have a plan in place that treats laid-off employees with dignity, and prepare yourself for the emotional toll.

"HR people are so used to taking care of others, but you have to take care of yourself," says Mathews.

"HR [professionals] shouldn't be left out to dry," adds Le-Crone. "They need support, too. They are closest to survivors. And HR and line managers need to recover quickly for the organization to recover from a layoff." 