

I am a manager in a large corporation that is planning to downsize. We are about six months out from the announcement to employees. I'm having difficulty working and interacting with people who I know won't have a job when this all goes down. What should I do?

Most often we hear about the hardships suffered by those who find themselves unemployed. Obviously, this distress extends to family members and even friends, but this only part of the story. Owners, supervisors and coworkers also experience emotional upheaval. Thus, in a downsizing situation, no one is left unaffected.

Your discomfort is to be expected. The feelings you're experiencing often happen when there is a delay between when the choices are made and when the layoffs are announced. Change of this nature is met with a rush of emotions including bewilderment, anger, despair, confusion, helplessness and even hopelessness. For survivors of downsizing, guilt also comes into play. Not surprisingly, symptoms of depression and anxiety often occur. Remember, the adjustment will take time and will be complicated by individualized response patterns. Your emotions are likely to last as long as turmoil goes on. But, as new opportunities arise for employees and adjustments are made, a sense of normalcy will return. Now let's get to the specifics:

1. **Know that you still have an important job to do.** This is a time when leaders rise to the occasion recognizing that it is better to adapt to the situation than to have a plant or company shut down completely. As a leader you are key to helping others successfully navigate the angst of corporate change and guiding those who remain back to a new era of normalcy. If you feel badly now, imagine if the downsizing is poorly executed.
2. **To the degree possible, and if your position within the company allows it, work on executing a smooth, painless-as-possible downsizing.** Hopefully, the company will announce the downsizing to employees in time for them to seek and find new positions. A minimum of one month's notice is advisable. If possible, prepare to support the downsized employees with counseling and assistance in their job search. This will lessen the negatives for employees and the stress on you. Additionally, the use of outside counseling sources can be beneficial to all parties – management, departing employees and those who remain.
3. **Know the reason for the downsizing and be prepared to discuss this with your employees when the time comes.** You need to be prepared to have this conversation many times. Be honest and genuine. Your credibility is on the line. Noted organizational consultant and author, Robert Bacal, emphasizes that, "the nature of change is secondary to the perceptions that employees have regarding the ability, competence and credibility of senior and middle management." When

the time comes, what you can offer is a rationale for downsizing that is factual. Allow for venting without giving counter arguments. As Bacal states, "Don't under manage by assuming it will 'work itself out' and don't overreact when faced with reasonable resistance." If you are confronted about impending changes before the announcement is made, you cannot lie, but you may not be allowed to give out specific information. You may clearly state your dilemma to employees, but not give any hints that could lead to cries of favoritism or give false hope.

4. **Treat all employees with respect.** Keep in mind that survivors will observe the way the company treats those being let go. Why would they want to stick around and work for a company that treats people badly? That being said, your ability to be effective is clearly dependent on the overall tenor of the company. Organizations that are healthy to begin with often get through this difficult process with fewer problems than those that were dysfunctional to start. Conflict arises when the methods or reasons a company uses to choose who will be dismissed seem to be or are disingenuous. You cannot defend sins of the past and can only hope that company policy will help you do your job.
5. **Value your survivors -- they will need reassurance.** Those who make it through a cut exhibit conflicted feelings. On one hand there is relief, but this is countered by guilt when friends have not been so lucky. Also, there is the troublesome and lingering concern that there will be a next time when they are not as fortunate. Distrust of the company often becomes a factor. You must demonstrate the belief that things will get better and could even be an improvement.

Downsizing is very personal, but in West Virginia it becomes a community experience. Reduction of work force means fewer people to buy goods and services. Tax bases are threatened. Friends may have to move. For a while the ripple effect seems like a tsunami...ruining life as it has been for years.

West Virginians are resilient. After the shock wears off, rebuilding does start. New skills may be needed and some hardship will occur, but with realistic expectations and persistent effort the future should look bright. If you can hold onto this long-range view, you will survive too and be a better manager. Most importantly, you will have earned the respect of all those around you.