

CAREER COUCH

Dealing With Low Morale After Others Are Laid Off

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Q. *Recent job cuts have created low morale among you and your colleagues. Is there anything you can do about it?*



A. There are steps you can take, although the negative atmosphere may be out of your control to a large extent.

The mood after layoffs is set by managers, said Simma Lieberman, a management consultant in Albany, Calif., and if they fail to address the situation from the beginning, morale can sink quickly.

“One of the worst actions management can take during this time is to not acknowledge the situation and the impact it is having on employees,” Ms. Lieberman said. “This only makes the situation worse.”

Q. *How do the employees who remain after layoffs tend to feel?*

A. In any period of uncertainty, even the most confident employees can be anxious about the future, especially if management has made no guarantees, said Richard Chaifetz, chairman and chief executive of ComPsych, an employee assistance provider in Chicago.

“People like to have a sense of equilibrium and to be able to predict their current and near-term situation,” he said. “A disruption such as a sizable layoff creates a perceived lack of control, and people will grasp for things that provide a sense of security.”

Guilt among those who were spared can be a factor as well, said Kevin Coyne, a management consultant in Atlanta, especially if the cuts eliminated a group of hard-working veteran employees.

“If you’ve worked someplace long enough to get to know your colleagues, it’s inevitable to play the ‘Why me?’ and ‘Why him?’ games,” Mr. Coyne said. “Nobody is immune from thoughts like these.”

Q. How can low morale affect overall performance?

A. Reactions can vary greatly. Low morale might lead to incessant gossiping about which employees were cut and who will be going next.

For others, attendance might suffer. Still others might respond to the stress by spending hours exploring online job boards for alternative employment that — at least on a computer screen — sounds like an improvement over the current job.

Disillusionment could even beget general irritability and a lack of focus that combine to slow productivity. Alan Weiss, president of Summit Consulting Group, a consulting firm in East Greenwich, R.I., said that in these cases, most employees were not even aware they were contributing to low morale until it was too late.

“When people are miserable, they enter into a sort of metaphorical hiding,” Mr. Weiss said. “Even when they’re physically present, they’re mentally some other place, which tends to overshadow everything else.”

Q. How can you help to combat the negative atmosphere?

A. The best way is to lead by example. Alexandra Levit, president of Inspiration at Work, a career consulting firm in Chicago, recommends focusing on the positive, and making a commitment to achieving individual goals in the face of adversity.

“There are always going to be aspects of the business world that are frustrating,” said Ms. Levit, author of “They Don’t Teach Corporate in College: A Twenty-Something’s Guide to the Business World.” “As a human being, you’re responsible for choosing a response to your environment and acting accordingly.”

Another solution is to invite communication and levity. Take a colleague out to lunch. Invite her to share her feelings. At the end of the meal, share a funny story or joke. Donna Flagg, president of the Krysalis Group, a consulting firm in New York, said these small efforts toward making colleagues feel special could go a long way toward lightening the mood.

“Anything that attempts to change the attitude in the office is a step in the right direction,” she said.

Q. Are there risks in tackling low morale yourself?

A. Definitely. For one thing, being too cheerful during a difficult time could alienate your colleagues.

Mr. Weiss, the consultant from Rhode Island, added that during layoffs, overly positive people risked being seen by colleagues as a pawn of management.

“It’s natural for colleagues to think, ‘If we’re so sad, why is he so happy?’” Mr. Weiss said. “You need to be careful of this if you decide it’s your job to spread positive thinking across the office.”

Richard Chang, chief executive of Richard Chang Associates, a consulting firm in Lake Forest, Calif., said becoming too much of a cheerleader might raise your profile in all the wrong ways. Mr. Chang said that if managers thought you were spending too much of your work day rallying the troops, they might consider firing you for underperforming.

“Whatever you do, your first obligation is to your own responsibilities,” he said. “At a time of turmoil, when jobs are being cut, the very last thing you want is for management to perceive you as a slacker.”

Q. If the situation doesn’t improve, should you consider moving on?

A. Stefanie Smith, president of Stratex, an executive consulting firm in New York, says that if employees do not see office morale improve significantly within three to six months of the initial layoffs, they should start thinking about updating résumés and finding new jobs.

“You need to ask yourself, ‘What do I ultimately want from this situation?’” Ms. Smith said. “If you identify something you’re no longer getting from the job, it might be daunting, but it’s in your best interest to move on.”

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