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LIFE'S WORK

Dear Valued Worker, You're Fired



Koren Shadmi

By [LISA BELKIN](#)
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THE woman was all but led out the door in handcuffs. A security guard by her side, she was told to leave the building immediately. She'd been crying, and her mascara was running, but she wasn't permitted into the restroom to splash water onto her face, so she walked past her (former) colleagues with raccoon eyes.

Her offense? She lost her job, laid off in the wave of dismissals on Wall Street at an investment firm you have been reading about. (She did not want her name or her employer's name used because she is still haggling over money she says she is owed.)

"There are some very wrong ways to fire people," said Rachelle Canter, who has spent 20 years in executive outplacement as president of RJC Associates in San Francisco, working with people who have been fired, and companies that are firing.

Treating a downsizing victim like a criminal, she said, is one of those ways. Yes, sometimes it is in the interest of company security to ask an employee to leave right away, she said, but it can be done politely.

So there are wrong ways to dismiss someone. But is there really a right way to do it?

It is a particularly relevant question in an economy like this one, where the news is filled with people losing their jobs. New York City is expected to lose 33,000 finance jobs this year, according to the [Independent Budget Office](#) in Manhattan.

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Retail chains are closing stores — [Starbucks](#) alone will shutter 600 locations around the country, meaning as many as 12,000 workers will lose their jobs.

Manufacturing is taking a hit. [General Motors](#) announced last week that it was closing four plants, and reducing its salary costs by 20 percent.

All those statistics eventually become individuals taking their final walk through their workplace. For every person who is fired, there is someone whose job it is to fire them, and those who have dismissed colleagues say it is something they dread.

And it is a job made more complicated by the fact that most people who fire others are figuring it out as they go along. Not that such knowledge makes it easier if you are the one being let go.

If you find yourself being fired, the most important thing to remember (besides that it's actually O.K. to cry) is that you'll be in shock, and you won't be thinking straight, so don't feel the need to ask every question then and there.

You should make sure to leave the room knowing how to contact someone who can answer your questions later on, when you have a chance to calm down. Try not to become defensive or argumentative; if there are issues to be disputed, you can do that later.

The same general advice applies to those charged with doing the firings, namely, keep things short and calm.

“The goal is to do it in a way that you don't feel awful about yourself, you treated someone with respect,” said Donna Flagg, who has fired more than two dozen people during her decade in retail sales, and is now president of the Krysalis Group, a business and management consulting firm. “I don't think anyone is actually good at it,” she said.

When those with experience were asked for the dos and don'ts of how to fire an employee, they all agreed on one thing: don't ever use the word “fire.”

“It's time for us to part company,” is Ms. Flagg's preferred phrasing.

Barry Maher, a business consultant who was fired from his first job after two hours when a more qualified candidate walked through the door, prefers the phrase “let you go.” Or, as one of his clients says when breaking dismissal news, “It's time to help you succeed elsewhere.”

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There are two kinds of exit conversations, those that are personal (an employee has done something to warrant dismissal) and those that are not (the company is foundering or merging and someone has to go).

Of the two, the first is far more complicated. The dismissal is in fact a direct attack on a worker's worth. There is no ego-shielding veil, like the economy, to hide behind.

Dr. Canter, who has a Ph.D. in social psychology, said that those handling such dismissals should make it a goal "to treat the employee like a person, not like an item you can just delete from your screen." That would be her advice based solely on the Golden Rule, she said, but it also happens to make good business sense.

Every dismissal has an audience, she pointed out, consisting of employees who remain. People talk. And if you march a staff member out of the office sobbing, people watch. "The best of your staff can always get good jobs elsewhere, even in the worst economy," she said. "And they will if you make it clear that you are willing to mistreat others."

While this has always been true, it is even more so in the Internet age, as management at Paul Hastings, a California law firm, found out in May. They terminated an associate six days after she suffered a miscarriage. The employee, Shinyung Oh, did not say the firing was related to the miscarriage but rather calls it a case of terrible timing. She responded by e-mailing a lengthy account of what she described as her callous treatment to associates firm-wide. It quickly found its way to every corner of the legal community.

"If this response seems particularly emotional, perhaps an associate's emotional vulnerability after a recent miscarriage is a factor you should consider the next time you fire or lay someone off," she wrote. "It shows startlingly poor judgment and management skills — and cowardice — on your parts."

And speaking of the Internet, another rule on the list of don'ts, veterans say, is to never use it as a way to fire people. Radio Shack made headlines when it did that in 2006, sending an e-mail message to 400 employees in its Fort Worth headquarters that read: "The work-force reduction notification is currently in progress. Unfortunately your position is one that has been eliminated."

The free-for-all of cyberspace has become part of the dynamic in the second category of dismissals, too — the large-scale layoff. While it is less of an ego blow to be fired because a company is flailing, it is certainly as stressful and the end result is the same: you are out of a job. It's no wonder that employees vent that stress online.

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When Starbucks announced pending downsizing earlier this month, employees gathered at the virtual water cooler — on starbucksgossip.com, a site not affiliated with the company — looking for information.

“Does anyone have a list of stores that were already informed?” “Does anyone know anything about any TX stores? please respond!!! “Anything in the Chicago area?”

Howard Schultz, the company’s chief executive, said in a statement at the time that no list would be released until the managers of the targeted stores had a chance to tell employees in person.

But the delay did not sit well with employees waiting to learn if their jobs were about to disappear, and last week, the company released a list of the 600 locations.

THAT employees were in fact notified before the list was made public placated many. At one Starbucks in Mississippi, a state that is losing more than 20 percent of its Starbucks locations, a worker said her manager “did an exceptional job” with the notifications. (The worker would not give her name because company policy does not allow employees to talk to the news media.)

“It was quick,” she said. The manager “found out at 12:45 on a certain day, and she gathered us all immediately. By 6 p.m., she had all 20 employees assembled. That’s pretty hard to do, given our varied schedules and everything. I just don’t see how she could have personally done any more.”

For others, the personal touch did not make up for the weeks of uncertainty. “I think it could of been handled differently,” wrote one poster to starbucksgossip.com, who identified himself only as Mike. “I don’t know how exactly,” he wrote, “but there has to be a better way.”

Or is there?

You can rip off the bandage quickly or slowly. But the bottom line is that whether delivered by e-mail message or scented note, by brash bureaucrat or sensitive superior, and whether it is called a layoff or a dismissal or a parting of the ways, you are still being fired.