

Managers guide for informing employees of reduction in force

Managers are in a leadership position and often work in an environment of ambiguity and uncertainty, which can be very stressful. Some managers may feel more stress than others during a reduction in force (RIF) depending on the type and length of relationship with their employees.

Here's a list of tips to help you prepare for communicating a RIF to employees:

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- ❑ Speak to the chosen employees in a private place. Have another person present, if possible.
 - ❑ Demonstrate care and respect – it's critical to those being affected by the layoff and the survivors.
 - ❑ Maintain good eye contact and try to be yourself.
 - ❑ Communicate as honestly and openly as possible.
 - ❑ Stick to the facts and be firm about the company's decisions. DO NOT make any reassurances or commitments, unless you know them to be 100% accurate.
 - ❑ Make sure you understand the most applicable Human Resource Policies & Procedures. Be knowledgeable about communicating information such as severance packages, health benefits and the EAP/outplacement services that are being offered.
 - ❑ If you are asked a question and you don't know the answer, agree to find out and get back to the person.
 - ❑ Emphasise that making the decision for reduction in force was difficult for everyone. Avoid blaming anyone.
 - ❑ Be respectful and empathetic. Allow the employee to communicate their feelings and don't be defensive.
 - ❑ Prepare yourself for the unexpected. Nearly every employee will react differently, so don't be surprised if you see a wide range of reactions.

Understanding reactions that employees may express during a RIF

It may be helpful to evaluate each of the employees being notified and anticipate their reaction. It is important to understand how well your employees get along with others, follow general policies and feel about the company management. This will help you to be more prepared as you help them with the transition.

It is important to understand some of the typical reaction patterns and how to respond to them:

Denial – Employees can't comprehend the information. They feel this is a bad dream.

Your response – Give the employee time to digest the information. Restate the facts in different ways. Empathise with them by saying things like, "I know this is quite a shock" or "This is really hard to understand at first." Give the employee direction on what they need to do. Encourage them to call you or the HR Department if they have questions.

Crying – Some employees may cry or become hysterical when they are told that their job has been eliminated – this is normal.

Your response – Let the person express some of their feelings. Make sure you have tissues available. Encourage the employee to try to calm down by breathing in through the nose and out through their mouth – this will lower their heart rate and help them to calm down. Empathise with the shock of the information by saying things like "I understand." Redirect them to what they need to know and need to do. If the employee does not calm down, get help.

Anxiety – Some employees may feel faint or extremely nervous. Sudden news of this magnitude can launch people into panic. This is information that they may have never considered before, and they may be thinking about the worst possible impact on their daily living.

Your response – Let the employee express their feelings. Reassure them about the reduction process and services available to them. Remind them this is a shock and it will take time to figure out a recovery plan. Encourage them to take one step at a time.

Angry Behaviour – Some employees will respond with anger. This reaction comes from feelings of betrayal, powerlessness and loss of control. They may raise their voice or pound their fist on the table out of frustration. This is a common reaction, but one of the most discomforting. You may feel more comfortable having a peer in the room with you.

Your response – Stay calm, use a soft voice and let them express their feelings. Don't try to defend the company or justify the decision. Empathise with the feelings of betrayal and disbelief without taking sides. If they have further questions about how the decisions were made, refer them to Human Resources.

Threatening Behaviour – Preparation for this meeting is essential.

Employees who may respond with threatening behaviour usually have a history of giving signs and symptoms of this type of behaviour. The following is a list of those:

Warning Signals:

- An employee who is frequently disgruntled, files complaints and grievances.
- An employee who bullies others verbally, physically or in writing.
- An employee who has a sense of entitlement to upward mobility.
- An employee who has disdain for authority.
- An employee who has been known to throw or break things, or “trash” the work area.
- An employee who has a fascination with weapons or guns.

Prior to the meeting: Be absolutely sure to have another peer with you in the room. Determine a signal with your peer to indicate the need to call in security or the police, if the employee becomes threatening. Be sure to notify security of the time of the meeting so they can be posted near the office if they need to escort the employee off the premises.

Your response – During the meeting, if someone becomes threatening, stay calm and use a soft voice. Be patient, reassuring and non-threatening. Suspend any discussion of the reduction in force and leave the room as soon as possible.



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