



What to Do When You Survive the Layoffs

How to handle the guilt and the work when your colleagues get laid off

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You're supposed to be one of the lucky ones. You survived your company's recent round of downsizing.

Then why do you feel sad, angry and scared?

Here's how to cope when co-workers lose their jobs.

KNOW THAT YOUR FEELINGS ARE NORMAL

Since December 2007, the number of unemployed persons in the US has increased by 2.7 million. Those folks surely have had a harder time of it than their co-workers still with jobs.

But those left behind may well be experiencing a normal range of emotions, from survivor's guilt to worry about whether you could be in the next round, say career experts.

"Why were those people let go and I wasn't?" "Could I have prevented it in any way?" These are some of the thoughts that may keep you up at night, says Marjorie Brody, CEO of BRODY Professional Development in Jenkintown, Pa.

But keep in mind those people were not let go because of you, says Brody, an executive coach. Even if you were the one who did the laying off, weaker economic conditions beyond your control probably played a big part, she says.

Michael Barr of The Chicago School of Professional Psychology says many survivors also feel betrayed by the company, especially if the company was supposedly doing well at the last staff meeting.

"If you want information, and you think you have a good enough relationship with your supervisor, ask for it," says Barr. "There is a good possibility that she or he was blindsided as well."

"Things change rapidly in business, so what you are hearing could be the truth — they thought things 'were' going well," he adds.

Barr cautions against complaining to colleagues. It generally results in downward productivity and morale spiral, he says.

"If you just want someone to listen, find a supportive friend or family member," he says.

ASK ABOUT YOUR FUTURE WITH THE COMPANY

Survivors do feel a heightened anxiety because of an increased workload, change in duties and the possibility that they could be let go, say career experts.

There's nothing wrong with asking questions, says Barr: Am I on the list? How would I know? Would I get severance? Is the information in that newspaper article correct?

"If your company is doing town hall meetings, attend, and bring questions with you," says Barr.

But be prepared that people may not have the answers, says Facella.

If communication is not being handled well, ask yourself, what are your options? says Barr. Most likely, you want to continue performing well, even if you want to leave the organization.

WORK ON MANAGING "GHOST WORK"

Ask your supervisor to give you detailed job descriptions of laid-off co-workers whose responsibilities you are now expected to shoulder, says Paul Facella, author of "Everything I Know about Business I Learned at McDonald's."

Then set up a meeting with him or her to review the new tasks, he says. He says this will help you prioritize and your boss will be aware of and accountable for an excess workload.

If you are taking on new job duties, be sure to ask if you will get training, says Barr. Sometimes the ones who are let go are the only ones who know how to do a task.

Don't kill yourself, says Facella. Commit to working regular — not extra long hours, he says. You are no good to the company if your workload starts to take a toll on your mental and physical health.

SHOW YOUR BOSS YOU ARE NOT EXPENDABLE

Do work that matters, says Stuart Sidle, director of Industrial-Organizational Psychology Graduate Program at University of New Haven in West Haven, Conn. Writing reports that no one reads is a warning sign that you may be in the next round, he says.

"To reduce this risk of irrelevancy, become an expert on organizational tasks that are crucial that most people are too lazy or disinterested to learn," says Sidle.

Facella suggests coming up with three to five specific areas where former employees' tasks were inefficient or redundant and presenting a plan to streamline the processes. He also advises submitting a report of cost-cutting proposals.

Try to maintain a positive attitude, say career experts. Take on new tasks cheerfully and work to be a top performer.

START LOOKING FOR ANOTHER JOB — NOW

Layoffs are a warning sign that more may be coming, says Sidle.

Make sure you are networking. Relationships outside of the office are sometimes more critical than the actual work, says Brody. Most people find opportunities through connections as opposed to resumes on career sites, says Facella.

If you wish you had been laid off — you wanted the early retirement — talk to someone in human resources, says Barr, but emphasize that you are committed to the organization.

He suggests thinking about what you would be doing if you were retired and seeing if you can start doing some of those things now. He says people often romanticize retirement.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Make sure you are exercising and eating right, says Sidle. Exercise can be an antidepressant and stress reliever.

Lean on your support system, says Barr. Focus on things outside of work that you like to do.

Seek help if your anxiety manifests into physical symptoms, such as a change in sleeping and eating patterns, says Barr.

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