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Downsizing Survivors: Motivating the Employees Who Remain After Layoffs Value, Self-Esteem, and Career Development During Layoffs

By Susan M. Heathfield

You can't open a newspaper or visit a news website without seeing notices of corporate layoffs. And layoffs create downsizing survivors, the people who remain in your company after the downsizing.

Are you a traditional manufacturing facility currently experiencing an industry sales slump? Are you a governmental agency or university unable to fill positions as people leave? For whatever reason, your organization downsized, right-sized, eliminated redundancy, experienced layoffs or cut staff.

No matter your circumstances, you all have something in common during and after downsizing - layoff survivors, those "could be," "should be," lucky employees who made the cut during the layoffs and downsizing.

Most organizations invest their efforts in helping the downsized employees move on. This is ethical, reasonable and positive. Plus, your survivors are watching.

To truly benefit from the layoffs and downsizing you experienced, however, you need to invest even more energy in the people who remain after downsizing and layoffs. You will aid recovery; fuel productivity; boost morale, despite the loss; and minimize the damage to workplace trust.

You can help managers effectively address the needs of the people who remain after layoffs. To reap the real benefits of downsizing, you must address these issues in your organization.

Demonstrate That You Value the Layoff Survivors After a Downsizing

If you are a manager, it is most important to reassure the people who report to you of their value to you and the organization. You need to talk with each of them individually to let them know why and how they are valued; tell them what you feel they contribute to your effective, continuously improving work environment.

No matter how reassuring you or your executive leadership has been, believe me, on some level, after layoffs, trust has been injured. Employees need reassurance about their security. They need reassurance about why the people who were let go in the downsizing were chosen. They need reassurance about their future.

You don't want your layoff survivors feeling as if they are the victims. Because in many ways, they may feel like victims. They may have more work to do; they may have different jobs to learn; you may ask them to step up and take on higher level and broader responsibilities.

For some, this is exciting and career expanding. For others, depending on their life circumstances, this may prove difficult. In a client university human resource department, one person is now working at a staff assistance counter that was staffed by five just a couple of years



ago. You can bet she is feeling overworked and under-appreciated.

Look for ways to streamline current work. With fewer people, after layoffs, work with your customer to identify the work processes that add the least value to the customer experience. Eliminate them.