

Our May HR X-Change focused on what happens “after downsizing.” Darlene R. Mack (MA, CMP, SPHR) CEO & Managing Partner with HR Partners International, Inc., a full service global Senior Human Resources Consulting and Coaching firm, led us through the session. Read the groups’ collective responses to the questions, and some additional comments, that follow:

- I. WHAT DO WE DO WITH THE WORKLOAD OF THOSE WHO’VE LEFT? DO WE NEED TO ADJUST OUR EXPECTATIONS? HOW MUCH IS GOOD ENOUGH?

Can’t Do Everything

The “Good Enough” organization/department - can’t do it all like before

- Understand that the workplace is forever changed.
- Re-evaluate goals, then rank them.
- Make certain your efforts are focused, like a laser beam, on tasks that support the accomplishment of the most important goals.
- With fewer employees, consider eliminating unproductive meetings, initiatives that don’t put you closer to the customer, and employee requirements that don’t add value to your product or your service. Process map your key work processes to eliminate non-value added steps.
- Look especially to eliminate steps that are redundant, repetitive, time adding or permission requiring. Additionally, use a systematic problem solving process to tackle consistent, irritating problems. Create measures of success, and provide constant feedback, so people know how they are doing within the new organization.

- II. WHAT KINDS OF BEHAVIORS CAN WE EXPECT TO SEE FROM “SURVIVORS”?

Survivors

General

- Trust is gone
- Emotions include loss, grief, anger, betrayal, guilt; people process at different rates
- Illness, defensiveness, low energy, lack of motivation, difficulty concentrating, accidents, interpersonal conflict

Behaviors - personality

- Hide-out; lowered eyes (terrorist mentality)
- Passive disengagement/Active disengagement
- Look for new jobs
- Emotions short
- See it as a challenge/opportunity
- Talk it out; complain or support
- Support/Sabotage change

Personal

- Can feel like victims
 - More work to do
 - Different jobs to learn
 - Higher level and broader responsibilities
 - “Overworked and under-appreciated”

- Feel guilt about being employed when others are not

III. SURVIVORS – HOW DO WE ADDRESS THEIR NEEDS?

HR is Change Agent

Corporately:

- Handle employee relationships with compassion – remember these are human BEings first, and employees second
- Communicate, communicate, communicate – newsletters, newsboards, morale efforts
- Context, rationale for terminations and choices
- Management should be interactive and visible, daily – display air of confidence and competence
- Make sure some things do stay the same after the downsizing – expected events, sponsorships, meeting structures, etc. – the message is that life at work does move on
- Increase company activities that will restore harmony, friendship and trust
- Establish new traditions as an organization
- Consciously foster creativity and innovation
- Mark ending with new beginning – re-emphasize, re-define mission, vision, goals
- Involve staff – new incentives, recognitions, appreciation

Individually:

- Need individual conversations with managers – why and how they're valued
 - Get specific about their contributions
- Need reassurance about their security
 - How were people chosen to be let go
- Involve family – varying levels of support; EAP
- Focus on Career Development (seems counter-intuitive) – provide knowledge and skills necessary to do the new job
- Focus on building self-esteem – make sure they have the confidence to know that they can learn the new skills
- Address their worry about time and energy to step up to the challenge
- Quarterly coaching vs. annual appraisals

How People Experience Change

People experience personal distress during changes such as downsizing. This distress can include illness, defensiveness, low energy, lack of motivation, difficulty concentrating, accidents, and interpersonal conflict. Often individuals blame themselves for being weak or for their inability "to handle it."

Sometimes organizations label people as "resisters" when, in reality, people move through the stages of change at different rates. How an organization introduces change has a profound impact as well. "People don't mind change; they mind being changed," is a statement organizations need to take to heart. In a downsizing, people experience "being changed." Thus, ownership of the changes is more difficult to create.

People form deep attachments to their coworkers, their work groups, their companies, their organizational structures and systems, their personal responsibilities, and their ways of accomplishing

work. (If you find this difficult to believe, try changing an individual's work hours by even fifteen minutes, or establish a dress code for a work environment that encourages casual dress.)

When anything that is important or close to people is disturbed, whether by personal choice or through a larger organizational process over which they have no control, a transition period occurs. During this transition, people can expect to experience a period of letting go of the old ways as they begin moving toward and integrating the new.

As the Human Resources professional, manager, supervisor, leader, change agent or sponsor, you need to understand these issues around change and resistance to change. You must support the people in your organization through the downsizing experience. You need to understand the normal progression of change; during layoffs and a downsizing you cannot expect an immediate return to total productivity. Give your survivors a break.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

The New Corporate Cultures: Revitalizing the Workplace After Downsizing, Mergers, and Reengineering, Terrence Deal et al, 2000

Successful Career Management in a Downsizing Organization: What the Survivors of Corporate Downsizing Learned from Downsizing and How They Learned to Manage their Careers Successfully, William Trochiano 2008

Charging Back Up the Hill: Workplace Recovery After Mergers, Acquisitions and Downsizings, Mitchell Lee Marks 2003

Responsible Restructuring: Creative and Profitable Alternatives to Layoffs, Wayne Cascio, 2002.