

IN FOCUS: MANAGING PEOPLE

MOTIVATING EMPLOYEES POST REDUNDANCIES

As organisations shed jobs, what are the implications for those left to take the businesses forward? **Helen Krag** examines the effect on employees, and discusses what needs to be in place for companies to emerge on the front foot.

'Marked man'; 'cut down'; 'chopped'; 'discarded' – a selection of metaphors employees have used to express their experience of a redundancy process. And such comments are not exclusive to those who have lost their job: they are equally likely to be uttered by those remaining to take the business forward.

Amongst the 'survivors' interviewed for this article, some common themes emerge. Employees may derive comfort by regarding redundancy as a 'process', because it brings a rational dimension to what can otherwise be a highly emotive experience; others are alienated because they perceive it to be de-personalised. In any event, such processes can take weeks to implement and could devastate employee morale.

The transition curve (Figure 1, opposite) illustrates six stages of change relevant to redundancy. Adapted from the 'grief cycle'

originally developed by Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, it identifies typical reactions and emotions evoked throughout the process.

Some valuable points arise:

- these reactions are a normal and acceptable part of change processes;
- there is a marked reduction in competence (and thus productivity), notably at the stage of 'depression and detachment', when employees lose sight of core business focus;
- the early stages of shock, denial and anger are negative states which deplete energy and lower morale; and
- employees move through the stages at different rates. Those who are stuck may need individual help, such as one-to-one coaching, to progress.

Post redundancy, the business imperative is to re-focus and meet plan. A commonly held

view is that, although unsettling, redundancy does not feature on the Richter scale, lives are not lost, and it is time to stop the whinging and get on with it. That approach, however, will not engage everybody.

This is a time to combine the drive to get 'back on track' with a strong interpersonal approach. HR staff may be feeling 'burned out', and will value support from colleagues who can manage their own response and influence desired change.

I would recommend the following five steps.

Five essential steps to achieve a motivated and engaged workforce

1. Understand

It is important to understand the effects of the redundancy process on your colleagues. Start with those close to you (subordinates, peers, managers) and listen to them. Colleagues want to be heard and their unique circumstances acknowledged. People are realistic – they know what challenges their company faces, and recognise when it is time to 'get on with it'. Understanding carries no cost and can help people move on and re-focus more rapidly.

2. Set clear direction.

Company goals may have changed, with the business steering a new path. It is important to tell employees this. Be clear about priorities, and let each person know what part they

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3. Communicate effectively from the top down.

This is more manageable with fewer employees, so if poor internal communication was an issue before, now is the time to address it with new approaches. Be clear about key messages - how they might be received, and what action you want recipients to take; review appropriate media (eg 'in person' announcements, newsletter, intranet, and email); and take ownership for your audience's reaction.

4. Value employee input.

Companies that interviewed staff for internal roles will have gleaned a treasure trove of ideas generated from within, so publish and act on the best ones. Remember, too, to say 'thank you' to employees when they do a good piece of work - be specific and keep it genuine.

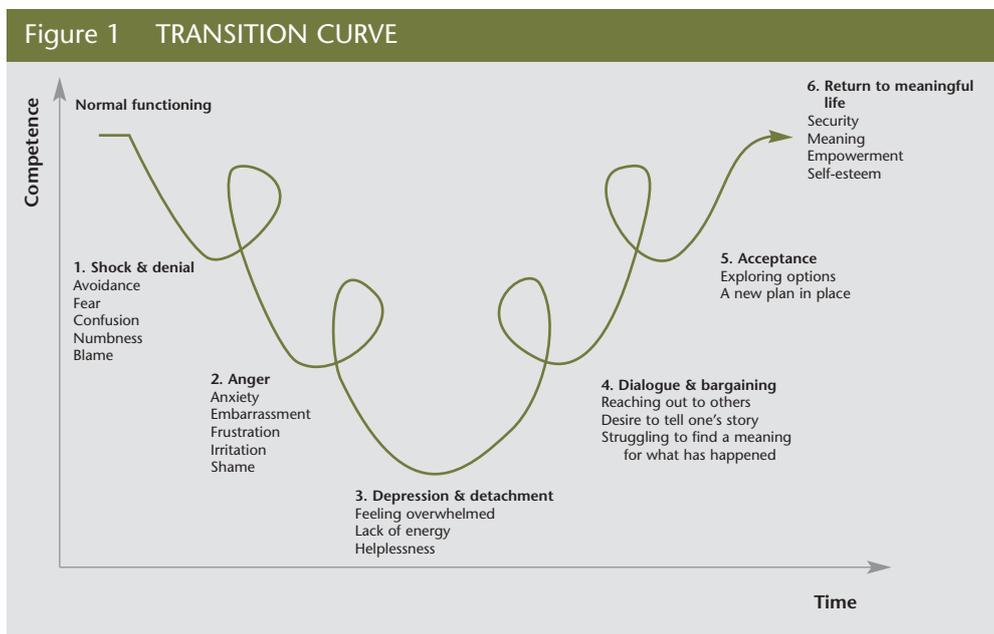
5. Beware of 'frivolous' team building activity.

Fun team activities such as go-carting have their place, but post-redundancy they can be ill received. Employees need to know that any engagement activity they are mandated to attend has the right motives, cast-iron outcomes and a genuine business imperative.

Conclusion

In summary, act in the interests of the company; provide first class leadership and direction;

Figure 1 TRANSITION CURVE



and respect employees as the unique individuals they are. Companies best able to engage with their employees and help them progress through the transition curve, are those most likely to emerge with a motivated and productive workforce. ■



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