

Decencies in separation.

By Steve Harrison



The emotional upheavals involved in the termination of employees — as well as the fear of lawsuits — often results in a lack of information about the process. An expert offers some advice to HR leaders about the importance of gestures of respect and kindness that — even if provided without expectation of reward — can positively rebound on their organizations.

The tendency to avoid talking about unpleasant experiences is not only human nature, it's also corporate nature.

Few companies are either willing or able to share detailed case studies about large-scale separations that are the typical outcome of market-driven mergers. I've worked in the outplacement industry for decades, and I know that nothing would be more helpful or encouraging for business leaders prepping to fire one employee or layoff hundreds.

Honest accounts from companies who have struggled with letting people go could give realistic advice and solace to managers who want to execute separations without inadvertently executing careers or self-images.

Certainly, legal advisers caution against sharing the nitty gritty of separations. As *Business Week* magazine's April, 2007 article entitled "Fear of Firing" delineated, companies are very likely to face lawsuits after any kind of separation, especially large-scale workforce reductions.

It's completely understandable, therefore, that companies don't want to go public with the story of how they made and enacted separation decisions. The resulting case study could, and would, be used against them in a court of law.

But I think there's more to the hesitation than merely avoiding a lawsuit. Companies find ways to limit liability and mask proprietary information all the time.

It's personal.

In my experience, the tender executive psyche is a more fundamental barrier to sharing blow-by-difficult-blow accounts of how layoffs were handled. Executives simply don't want to churn up the feelings of stress and guilt they personally experienced during the separation process.

Former Johnson & Johnson Chairman and CEO Ralph Larsen probably reflected most CEOs' experiences when he talked of the countless sleepless nights he suffered around the time of his company's 1998 restructuring, which resulted in the loss of 4,100 positions.

Enacting separations is uncomfortable because the emotional stakes are so high.

I have seen countless strong leaders stall and falter under these circumstances. When I met with Bob Hecht and Bob Lee to form Lee Hecht Harrison, Hecht shared this perspective: "The three greatest tragedies in a person's world are death, divorce, and job loss.

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“And you’d be surprised how many people would place these in a very different order,” he said. “Laid-off workers are not only separated from their jobs, they are also often separated from their reason for being.”

We know that separated people can slip into depression, self-destructive behavior, and more rarely, into violence targeted at others. In many cultures, the risk of suicide associated with job loss is well known.

Given that backdrop, who would volunteer to go back and talk about putting innocent people on one of those potential paths? Perhaps the executive who leads a separation event with courage and attention to behaviors I call “small decencies.”

What are “small decencies?”

These are gestures of respect, consideration and kindness that are freely offered, without expectation of reward. I believe that leaders can protect and even change corporate cultures by making small decency a habit.

Corporate cultures, like people themselves, are at their most vulnerable at the time of mass separations. When layoffs are imminent, small decencies can make all the difference.

A simple managerial commitment to small decencies during and immediately following a layoff does nothing to interfere with the economic necessities that forced the layoff. Small decencies will signal a leader’s sensitivity and caring, and a commitment to everyone who is watching.

By extension, acting with decency will help executives feel more comfortable with their own role in the necessary but tough situation.

What’s the magic?

Simple consideration, really, combined with absolute precision planning and transparency in execution.

One of the few downsizing experiences that has been shared in an open and detailed fashion is Agilent’s 2001 trimming of 4,000 jobs, or 9 percent of the company’s workforce. The separation process started with now-chairman emeritus Ned Barnholt’s insistence on three ground rules:

- Employees were to be notified only by their direct managers.
- Managers would be clear and honest.
- Layoff decisions were to be based on published criteria.

Transparency pervaded the rest of the process. The 3,000-plus managers who would be having tough conversations underwent extensive training. Honesty and fairness were the name of the game.

What can you do as an HR leader?

Help the executive team understand that while people have come to terms with downsizing as a fact of commercial life, they will never forgive a downsizing event that strips them of their dignity.

It takes conscious, sensitive orchestration to preserve dignity and be visibly fair. The tone and ground rules are set at the top, and then every involved manager needs the training, resources and motivation to make it happen correctly.

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Protecting dignity takes precision in planning and implementation. Urge your company to follow these guidelines:

- Before announcements are made, decide how you will handle references and any outplacement support. Plan to give separated employees specific information about what you will do to help them move on.
- Tell employees before anyone outside.
- Use sensitive words. For example, W.L. Gore & Associates is one of many companies who use the word “separation” when someone leaves the company. This approach reinforces that the event is about the end of a two-sided relationship, not simply a one-sided procedure like “rightsizing” or “reengineering” where people get coldly “terminated.”
- Pick the right day of the week: Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays are best. Managers may forget important pre-announcement training over the weekend before a Monday announcement. A Friday announcement makes it hard for companies to support those separated as well as those remaining
- Pick the right date. For individual separations, avoid the employee’s birthday, anniversary with the company, or proximity to religious holiday. For wider-scale separations, make sure that visible, non-essential expenditures like landscaping projects are not being undertaken around the time that cost-cutting job reductions are announced.
- Think through logistics such as transportation and packing material for personal items. Offer help such as car services and a store-room of boxes and tape.

- Have managers practice individual notifications before giving them. Instruct them to use direct language. Nothing is worse than an employee not understanding a message a well-intentioned manager might have couched in too much non-essential language.
- Locate individual separation conversations in private places like conference rooms where the employee can remain to make calls and gather their emotions before facing co-workers.
- Include time for listening. Listen to the employee after an individual notification, and listen to remaining employees as they work through the new reality.

How you do it is more important than why you are doing it.

Speak up for fairness, consistency, transparency and sensitivity.

In so doing, you'll be advocating for those who will lose their jobs, and easing the insecurity in those who stay. You'll also be protecting three delicate assets. Two are obvious: your company's culture and reputation. One is less apparent: your executives' comfort level with their role in the decision and its implementation.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that it's your job to pamper leaders or shelter them in any way from the hard part of their jobs.

Rather, I am suggesting that when there's a clear plan based on decency and dignity, such as the one used at Agilent, executives are going to experience less stress.

The worst time for them to be dealing with their own guilt — and therefore being physically or emotionally distant — is right after the

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announcement. Leaders need to be not only accessible, but also fully engaged in listening, caring and communicating.

That's one more giant order after the series of tall orders leading up to the announcement. No wonder even executives who do it right want to leave it behind after all is said and done. But if a leader can look back and say, "I treated the workforce as a whole and every individual with dignity and decency," maybe both the immediate sense of stress and the lingering sense of discomfort and self-doubt will be mitigated.

Mitigated enough, perhaps, to break the silence on separations so that we can collectively raise the bar in how we handle the toughest of business decisions.

Steve Harrison is chairman of Lee Hecht Harrison, a global leader in career management solutions based in Woodcliff Lake, N.J., and the author of *The Manager's Book of Decencies: How Small Gestures Build Great Companies* (McGraw-Hill, 2007). Help break the silence: share examples of how your company enacted separations with attention to small decencies.

Every month, Harrison gives a prize to the person submitting the most powerful example of a business decency. Go to www.bookofdecencies.com for more information.