

Layoffs Hurt, but a Compassionate Communications Strategy Can Soften the Blow

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Layoffs are an unfortunate reality of business, and the stress and pain they cause aren't easily overcome. Yet there are proven approaches that mitigate the pain of layoffs for the people being let go and those announcing the difficult terminations.

Navigating Layoffs with Compassion and Respect

Layoffs always *feel* wrong, but there is a *right* way to handle them. Let's look at what crisis management truly means when it comes to layoffs and how a wise communications strategy can keep a difficult situation from spiraling out of control.

DON'T prioritize your own feelings

Before terminating 900 Better.com employees over a Zoom meeting in 2021, CEO Vishal Garg told unsuspecting team members, *"This is the second time in my career I'm doing this, and I do not want to do this. The last time I did it, I cried; this time, I hope to be stronger."*

In the crisis workshops I lead for CEOs, I share footage of the Better.com layoffs because so many CEOs and leaders make the same mistake Mr. Garg made: he made the layoffs about himself.

I'm certain Mr. Garg did not want to lay off a third of his workforce. And I don't doubt that the layoffs caused him great distress. But a CEO's discomfort pales compared to a layoff's devastating impact on the company's employees.

By insinuating that his distress equaled the pain of the 900 individuals he'd just rendered jobless, Mr. Garg piled insult on top of injury.

DO provide a pipeline of support

Prior to announcing the layoffs, seek any and all ways to ease the workers' transitions into unemployment and improve their chances of rapid reemployment. Once you've defined those possibilities, invest in HR packets—digital, if necessary—that detail the severance terms, outline any career counseling options, and lay out the possibilities for benefits extensions.

Nothing you do can eliminate people's shock and sadness at being laid off. But you can lessen the impact by authentically acknowledging their feelings and offering practical support. Sometimes even the smallest gesture makes an enormous difference in how an employee receives their termination notice.

DON'T avoid taking responsibility

No company ever wants to admit that their projections were off, that they sold too little product, or that they hired too many people. Yet that brutal honesty is precisely what's lacking from many layoff communications.

If layoffs are necessary for your company's future success, saving face is no longer an option. Everyone knows something has gone terribly wrong. Pretending that all is well will simply make you look foolish—and can lead to a full-blown publicity nightmare as competitors and media outlets learn how you've misrepresented the crisis.

DO talk to your team like intelligent adults

Early in my PR career, I was made responsible for communicating layoffs to an entire department. Even my own job was being terminated.

Putting aside my shock and sadness, I walked into every employee's office, sat down, and explained what was happening. I talked to each person as a colleague and fellow "fighter" in the rough-and-tumble trenches.

"This has nothing to do with you," I explained to each talented team member. "But this is the situation, and this is what is going to happen."

There's seldom a reason *not* to have a face-to-face conversation with someone who's being laid off. The CEO isn't the only person who can hold these conversations; senior leaders and managers can be tasked with speaking to their direct reports.

What matters is respecting each person enough to look in their eyes and explain the situation empathetically and honestly.

DON'T treat your employees like villains

Of course, it's important to protect the interests of the company when navigating something as complex as layoffs. But when the employees are not at fault, compassion is especially critical.

Too frequently, workers who have done nothing wrong are embarrassed in front of their coworkers and disrespected by the very managers they worked so hard to support. Seek solutions that provide people with the dignity they deserve as victims of unfortunate circumstances.

DO honor the Golden Rule

It is possible to secure your company's proprietary assets while also *treating people the way you would want to be treated*.

If the nature of your business requires that laid-off employees be escorted out by security, proceed as unobtrusively as possible. If system access must be immediately rescinded, notify your employees and supply them with items they may wish to carry forward into their next role (such as copies of performance evaluations).

The most important thing you can do for the security of your company, however, is to treat your laid-off employees with respect. Look at your core values and ask yourself, "How can we maintain our core values throughout this layoff?"

Many workplaces refer to their team members as "family." Now, when work isn't feeling very familial, will you still do your best to care for them?

Develop a Future-Focused Communications Strategy

Mismanaged layoffs can haunt your business (and you, personally) for years to come.

Companies that botch a layoff may struggle to hire top talent in the future. In some cases, the remaining employees go on strike, and production grinds to a halt. Most commonly, businesses experience a steep and uncontrolled decline in morale that impacts how clients and customers perceive their brand.

When a company navigates layoffs with respect and compassion, however, they benefit from the enormous power of their people: to help the business overcome obstacles, thrive in the face of adversity, and succeed sustainably for many years to come.

When you're ready to build a foolproof crisis management communications strategy, reach out to the expert team at Goodwin Consulting.