

# Layoffs, Survivors, and Building A Great Culture

**David Irvine, The Leaders' Navigator**



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If your business is at all connected to the oil patch, layoffs have become so common these past five years that it is unusual to meet a senior manager who hasn't had to manage a reduction in their work force or isn't in the midst of planning one. The decision to execute a layoff and the choice of who is to be laid off can be so wrenching that many managers have little energy left to consider what happens after the layoff. How do you help the shell-shocked survivors recover and move forward in a productive way? How can you rebuild a great culture after you have laid people off? How can you build morale and increase employee engagement when you lay off half your workforce?

Below are nine strategies for guiding your culture toward cohesiveness, engagement, and trust while laying people off. Even if your organization isn't currently cutting back its workforce, you will find these approaches helpful in the midst of any change.

1) **Acknowledge the emotions.** During layoffs, people go through a wide range of legitimate emotions and they need structured opportunities to talk about what they are feeling. Just because people didn't get laid off doesn't mean they're necessarily happy. If you lay off one person in a thousand-employee division, a thousand people are affected. Below are a few examples of what people in times of downsizing experience:

- Many people are in shock from the trauma of it all.
- A good number will carry some guilt for not being the one let go.
- Many are afraid that they will be shot in the next round of layoffs.
- Many are grieving the loss of friendship or familiarity.
- Some, who may have been through layoffs before or perhaps have a spouse with a secure income, may simply be annoyed with other people who are anxious.
- Layoff survivors frequently talk about how isolated and disconnected they feel. Their sense of connection has been broken.
- Most are feeling overworked and under pressure because there are fewer people and resources, more demands, and added stress to perform - or they'll be next.

It doesn't take much to help people acknowledge their emotions. It also doesn't mean you have to spend all day, every day wallowing in the feelings. It simply means structuring time – a ½ hour a week, or the first ten minutes of a meeting – to give people some space to express honestly how they are doing or talk about whatever is on their mind. You can see the relief on people's faces when they hear what others are thinking and feeling and they know they aren't alone.

Some managers worry that acknowledging emotions will only stir up more anger and make things worse. I've never seen that happen. In fact, quite the opposite. Once people bring their feelings out in a constructive, honest, respectful manner, it doesn't take long before the discussions turn towards solutions. The participants help each other find a sense of hope and something positive to move toward. Sunlight is the best disinfectant.

- 2) **Make it safe to open up.** As a leader, you aren't responsible to fix the feelings that arise; people have to take responsibility to get themselves through their own emotions. Your job is to create a respectful and safe space where people can open up and get a sense of support from the organization. Let people know that being honest will never be a career limiting decision. If you find people are holding back in these sessions, get them into smaller groups where you know there are pockets of trust.

Another aspect of making it safe to open up is to allow some space for people to grieve, to say good-bye to their colleagues and friends. I've seen people cry and hug as they walk out the door on their last day in the organization. There's nothing wrong with this. There's nothing to fear. It's about being human, and supporting this helps create a more fully human organization. How can we expect people to be engaged if we don't accept and support people to be where they are?

- 3) **Exercise patience – with yourself and others.** Recognize that when people are in shock they behave in uncharacteristic ways. People are vulnerable, and expect that they may act out or blow their top. Don't be too surprised if that happens to you. As managers, you've been busy planning and managing the layoff, trying to get the company back on track, solving problems left and right. It's easy to push your own emotions aside while you focus on the work. Cut yourself some slack when this happens, and don't forget to apologize



personally to anyone who got in the path of your outburst. Emotional turmoil is all part of the transition process. It is a positive step forward, but everyone needs to learn to deal with their emotions constructively in a way that doesn't inflict pain or fear.

- 4) **Respect that people are in a transition.** Helping people come to grips with any change means leading them through a transition process. While that process is definable, it is anything but neat and tidy. Just when you need everyone to pull together and focus on rebuilding, people may lose focus, get sick, and spend excessive amounts of time talking at the water cooler or just staring into space. You may become the target of employee anger and distrust, or suspect that your top performers may be tuning up their resumes and looking for a more stable job. One of the most valuable things you can do is to just understand and accept what people are going through. In most cases you've known about the layoff longer than your people and have a head start on your own adjustment. Don't expect others to be on your timetable. You want to be ahead of people, but not so far ahead that you lose touch. Understand that your employees need time to work through the transition. One day everything is fine; the next day a layoff is announced. One day, you are enjoying a great marriage; the next day your spouse gets diagnosed with

cancer. One day you have a department with a hundred people; the next day there are sixty-five. These are external changes. Change, the external event, happens quickly. Transition, the reorientation that people go through to come to terms with the change, takes time and intentional leadership. Give people time and clarity to understand the process of transition and the time to work through it.

- 5) **Focus on creativity and community, not productivity.** While it's unrealistic to expect that work is going to stop while people come to terms with their emotions, putting added pressure on people when they are hurting and stressed by the workload drives mistrust, destructive tension, increased anxiety, and low morale. There's always a drop in productivity. Smart leaders understand and accept this, and work with it. Of course, productivity and accountability will always be a part of organizational life, regardless of the changes you go through. Times of uncertainty, increased stress, and high emotions, however, create an opportunity to build both community and creativity. It's important to create an environment where it's okay to take a five-minute break to breathe, go for a walk, or support a colleague who is hurting or anxious. Employees will step up and get the job done if they know they are supported. These crazy times are also times to be creative. Positive and innovative energy can be generated when people are stressed, immobilized, and in pain.

You, as a leader, don't need to have all the answers. Your people can help you solve the business problems, get through the shock and the chaos, and refocus on the work in front of them. Asking them to help with both these tasks will yield the collective wisdom of the group and may generate solutions you never thought of, as well as help people feel they have some control over their own future -- a key step in the process of making the transition to the new reality. I worked with a company recently that laid off a third of their workforce. At an all-day meeting, management declared three key targets that the company had to achieve. The entire group brainstormed the important issues that would have to be addressed to meet these targets and then generated potential solutions. One of the goals was the need to get back to the high level of teamwork and collaboration they had in the early days. After much discussion they came up with several very practical ideas. The discussion generated a substantial level of energy and excitement. In times of chaos, you'll find creative solutions in the group.

**6) Create an opportunity for people to have some degree of control.**

Destructive stress is created when people don't have any sense of control over what is happening. It's a fundamental human need to feel we can make an impact and have some influence over the direction of our life. One way to help foster this sense of control is to help them take a careful assessment of the situation. There are two fundamental questions that need to be facilitated and answered in tumultuous times. In the midst of so many changes ask:

- What are we committed to *preserve*? Not all change is good. People have to be clear and have some control over what we won't allow to change.
- What must we be willing to *let go of*? People need to be given the opportunity to acknowledge and say good-bye to the things that are lost -- something they need to do before they can start to think about the future.

**7) Share as much information as you can.** Tell people what you know. Tell them what you don't know. Information eases stress. In post-layoff meetings, I've seen management be both courageous and very effective by:

- sharing the financials with employees.
- showing the monthly burn rate before and after the layoff.
- talking about the future and being specific and realistic about what needed to happen to raise the next round of funding.
- exploring future scenarios and what their intentions are.
- answering *why* they made a decision to instigate a layoff strategy as well as the criteria they used for laying people off.
- taking the time to answer whatever questions were on people's minds.

Employees appreciated this level of information sharing. As well, this kind of sharing gave credibility to management's claims that they believed why laying people off was the only way the company could survive and be successful – long term.

**8) Bring a compass with you.** It is an old ironic habit of human beings to run faster when we have lost our way. In these chaotic, uncertain, demanding times, we just don't know what we will face in the terrain ahead of us, and there is no road map that will take us there. During chaotic times, it's

important to stop and get your bearings. Be guided by a vision, values, and principles, both personally and organizationally, rather than the pressures of others. What will get you through the cycle of change is staying aligned with your values. Personally, this means making sure that you take care of your health, sustaining a strong supportive community for support, and having a quiet place you go to renew yourself away from the work and the demands. Organizationally, it means getting the value statements off the wall and into people's hearts.

- 9) **Build a Bridge and Get Over It.** Eventually, even with all the support and with all the strategies for being creative and building a collaborative community in your organization, you have to get on with your work and your life. You have to take accountability for your own emotions and reactions, and make a decision to change your attitude, support your organization, or move on. Just as your future culture depends on the commitment of leaders to connect with employees, it also depends on employees making decisions that will move the culture forward. Employees must take accountability to get through the transition process. We all have to take responsibility for our life. No one can do your push ups for you.

To learn more about David Irvine, visit his website: [www.davidirvine.com](http://www.davidirvine.com)  
For additional complimentary resources to support your leadership, culture, and change initiatives, go to: [www.davidirvine.ca/resources](http://www.davidirvine.ca/resources)

For a complimentary consultation and assessment of how David might guide your organization through the transition process and into a future with a collaborative, engaged, high trust culture, contact David directly:

Phone Toll Free: 1-866-621-7008

Email: [david@davidirvine.com](mailto:david@davidirvine.com)

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