As economic conditions continue to be challenging for businesses, the need to unexpectedly reduce staff also continues. There is a delicate balance between business needs and the need to ensure positive engagement of your employees in all matters. Should you ever need to prepare for this challenging component of a business cycle, in Preparing for and Conducting a Separation or Reduction in Staff Notification Meeting, HBL Resources addresses business needs while creating an interaction that will engage your employees in a helpful, safe and constructive way.

**Pre-Meeting Preparation**

- Understand that informing a person of a job loss is a difficult and stressful task; a successful outcome requires preparation and good instincts. Draw on any personal experience you have with this, what did you like about any interaction what did you dislike? Use those experiences for thoughtful preparation.
- Become thoroughly familiar with the Reduction in Staff process and the content of any separation materials. Gather information and prepare to discuss any benefit continuations, forms provided or placement assistance etc.
- Make arrangements to meet with the employee. Consider travel distances where applicable, location, date, time and space needs. Open space offices or conference rooms where there is free flow of movement are best. Be cautious of office spaces where any one individual, may be boxed into the space without clear access to the door.
- Discuss with Human Resources or Executive Management any possible problems you feel could occur or any concerns you may have about the notification, the employee or the documents being presented. Arrange for another manager to be with you during the meeting(s).
- Anticipate questions that you could be asked by the employee and find the answers. Potentially, one of an employee’s most immediate needs or concerns during a notification meeting, is the concern for their financial security be prepared to address this (explained later).
- Be aware that the release process can be emotional for all parties including you; prepare for this potential. Tissues and bottled water, while may seem melodramatic can serve to be of great comfort in calming emotions and provide a sense of compassion.
- Be prepared for "push back". An employee may want to debate the need for this reduction particularly in comparison to others.
- Practice and rehearse the message you will deliver. It is perfectly acceptable to use other managers to role play these situations in advance for an opportunity to rehearse what might be unexpected situations, questions or reactions.
- Assess the impact of losing the employee on co-workers and customers. After reductions in staff there is a heightened sensitivity in those that remain, that may include questions like, who else may be affected, how long will reductions continue, who is going to do any work left by this new gap, etc.? Think of such things and prepare for that discussion. You can read more about that in Post Meeting.

**The Notification Meeting**

The primary purpose of the notification meeting is twofold: (1) to inform the employee that his/her job has been placed in lay-off or reduction in staff status and that their position is being eliminated causing their...
separation from employment which requires an immediate effective date and (2) to keep the person optimistic about the company and their future while preserving their dignity. These meetings can take anywhere from 30 minutes to over an hour depending on the individual employee, their questions and individual reactions.

Your Role Is The Informer.

- The meeting should be private with the exception of one management witness and uninterrupted. Cell phones and landline phones should be silenced. Your employee needs to know that you have taken measures to ensure that they know your communications with them are your sole top priority.
- Don't procrastinate – get directly to the point; announce the action calmly; stick with the script (see below); control the flow of the meeting; keep the employee focused.
- Do not make any comments, even if well intended, that could compromise the decision to reduce the workforce. Stay away from discussions that could confuse the primary message, (i.e., the notification meeting is not about employee performance or personal issues). Employees may want to discuss how busy they have been, excessive workloads that require them to remain on or outstanding assignments. Keep focused on relaying the message, thanking the employee for their selflessness and concern of the organization but the decision to move forward is irreversible.
- Be direct and firm as this will assure the person knows the decision is final. It is also important to be sensitive and compassionate to the person's situation. Use of facial expression and empathetic body language can help to soften the need to be direct. Don’t use terms such as “unfortunately, unluckily, regrettably, sadly…” These terms may create emotional negativity that the communication does not need. Use words that are neutral such as necessary, required, essential.
- Don't blame others for the actions being taken or allow the employee to do so. Remind the employee that it is solely due to economic conditions, business downturns or similar business environment issues that have caused this workforce change.
- Don't become defensive, argumentative or confrontational---your role is not to justify the decision that has been made. Should employees comment about reasons other than that which you have already addressed, advise the employee that you appreciate their feedback but the reasons remain as stated.
- Listen. It is important to ensure you closely listen and document anything that could lead to a potential problem later. Comments such as an employee’s intent to let everyone at work know, use social media negatively, intent to notify an attorney or similar comments should be noted. Advising the employee that, while it has been a mutually difficult communication, you were optimistic that the positive experiences with the organization thus far wouldn’t be completely jeopardized due to this necessary business decision. Thereafter notify your Executive management or Human Resources immediately.
- Review and complete any required forms with the employee. It is advised that you provide them with a memo or letter for all parties’ signature outlining the conversation contents. A brief one page document is sufficient which can be provided to them to assist with any explanations they need to make to future prospective employers or for unemployment purposes should documentation be required.
- Collect or make arrangements to collect ALL company property and tie up any business processes. Advise the employee that access to voice mail, email, computer systems will be discontinued and any
expense items outstanding (if applicable) should be turned in by the end of the business day. It is helpful to have a checklist of items to ensure nothing is overlooked. Items such as office keys, computer equipment, company issued cell phones and parking cards are likely to be included. Employees with desks or offices will require time to collect any personal effects. It is recommended that they return to their offices/desks to do so or the employee can return during off hours ensuring you are available to supervise the exit. (Contact HBL Resources if you are interested in our comprehensive Separation Packet).

• Offer support and encouragement. The employee should be given any information regarding outplacement assistance offered by the company. In the event no formal outplacement assistance is contracted, at a minimum the employer should provide a current list of similar open positions in the local market, a list of web based job boards in the respective industry, information and process regarding filing an unemployment claim and like information. This helps the employee become immediately focused on completing these processes during the transition between employers. Exit the employee in a dignified manner. Unless there is a serious fear of theft of key business property, verbal retaliation, violence in the workplace or the like, it is not advisable to oversee the employee’s desk/office cleanup or to “escort” the employee off premises. The individual who witnessed the discussion could accompany the employee after the conversation and indicate they are there to assist with transportation of personal affects. In this way the employer is knowledgeable of the employee’s whereabouts without the perception of an obvious escort.

• If you feel there is a need to secure the environment due to the employee’s potential for violence or other negative behavior you may want to schedule the meeting for non-peak hours or non-peak days. Additionally you should contact your human resources department, security designate or another third party to assist in preparedness.

**Anticipating and Handling Problems**

• The employee may become resistant, defensive and/or non-accepting of the action, may want to plead a case or bargain for another opportunity: Stay in control of the meeting and your emotions at all times. If the employee sees you flustered or out of control that is likely going to be their mirrored emotion. Keep a calm, yet firm tone which can help to de-escalate an elevating tone or voice of an employee.

• The person may want to speak with a "decision maker": Hopefully your organization has an engaging enough environment that a feeling of open communication exists. In the event the “decision maker” is agreeable to receiving communication, advise the employee that you will notify the “decision maker” of their interest in speaking with them. Obtain the best number, day(s) and time(s) from the employee for the “decision maker” can contact them, then ensure they do so. The communication should be no different than that which was stated in the Notification Meeting. Be certain to advise the decision maker or any relevant comments made by the employee during the notification meeting. In the event the decision maker is not made available for continued communications, advise the employee of that decision and that you would directly relay any information they wanted. Then, be certain to do so.
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- The employee may ask the "why me?" questions or any number of others. It is important to anticipate what may be asked and be prepared with a brief answer. Review The Questions below for assistance on commonly asked questions.
- The person may threaten a lawsuit or other retaliation: Let the person know that he/she is free to make whatever contacts they feel appropriate and that, while it has been a mutually difficult communication, you were optimistic that the positive experiences with the organization thus far wouldn’t be completely jeopardized due to this necessary business decision.
- The employee may try to make the issue personal or about performance, may argue about a person being retained who they believe is less capable, has less tenure, etc.: Reiterate that the decision is not about performance or about other employees. Be certain to get the discussion focused back on the main topic. Keep the focus of the Reduction focused on the position held and not on the individual employee in particular.

**Questions That may be Asked**

"Why Do You Want to Meet?" When you inform the employee that you need to meet with him or her, you may be asked "why?" Don't lie. Awkward as it may feel, it is best to merely state that you will discuss the reason when you meet. If you feel compelled to tell the person what action is to take place, consult with your Human Resources Department or Executive Management beforehand to discuss the situation.

"Why Me?" The "why me?" question is a natural reactive question. Unfortunately it has no answer that will satisfy the employee. The response should be only that "the decisions were difficult and if it is the case, that many good people were affected." The employee may inquire about who is being retained, as they will often want to compare themselves and make a case for their retention. This too is not unusual, but you cannot comment on that.

*Who made this decision?* It is important to be as transparent as possible, if a group or committee made the decision then it is ok to indicate such or simply indicate an executive decision or management decision. If you are the only person responsible for the workforce (owner, president etc.) it is fair to indicate it is a decision you have had to make.

*Who can I talk to regarding getting this decision changed?* It is expected that if you are conducting a Reduction in Staff Notification meeting, all efforts have been made to avoid this Reduction in Staff and that all other solutions have been exhausted. Advise the employee that the decision was not made lightly and cannot be changed.

*Are there any other jobs in the company?* It is expected that if you are conducting a Reduction in Staff Notification meeting, all efforts have been made to avoid this Reduction in Staff and that all other solutions have been exhausted. Advise the employee that the decision was not made lightly and cannot be changed.
Can I keep my job if I take a pay cut? It is expected that if you are conducting a Reduction in Staff Notification meeting, all efforts have been made to avoid this Reduction In Staff and that all other solutions have been exhausted. Advise the employee that the decision was not made lightly and cannot be changed. It is ok to be honest and advise the employee that cuts in pay, reduced salaries or delayed raises, have previously been invoked to avoid this Reduction in Staff step.

Who else is being released? If there will be other employees affected, simply advise the employee that names of others must be kept confidential at this time and ask the employee to empathize with the need to keep these names confidential.

Post Meeting

- Notify the Human Resources Department or Executive Management that the employee has been advised/exited the premises. Discuss any critical issues as a result of the conversation or key information contained within your notes.
- When multiple Reductions are necessary it is advisable to hold an employee/departmental meeting/conference call. You should inform employees about the actions that have taken place, particularly the need to reduce the staff. Understand and recognize that your people have lost friends and may have their own anxieties. It is ok to share the business environment which necessitated the decision. Get people re-focused quickly on the business.
- Be honest about what you know and can share; discuss workload and/or support concerns/needs; focus on the positives and the continued team approach.
- Do not assume "business as usual" acceptance. Be accessible to your people; keep an open door to listen to individual employee concerns and welcome their comments.
- Thank people for their continued support; restate the business objectives; make no promises or guarantees about the future (a good response is "the future is up to us"). It is reassuring and can often calm any fears to advise the employees remaining that while “the future is up to us” all necessary notification discussions have taken place for the business needs at this time.
- Make contact, and meet with, any new person coming into your group that may have entered as a result of any workforce reductions or lateral moves. Introduce them to others and orient them to the business unit or departments “norms”.
- You may consider advising the appropriate customers about internal changes that may affect them. Nothing is worst for a customer than to call and be surprised that they have been assigned a new company contact. Let them know before they need to make contact. Introduce them to new contacts and service providers as appropriate to ensure they have an immediate sense of comfort with their new representative.
- Of course, never make any disparaging remarks about anyone leaving the company doing so could put the business at risk.

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