

# HANDLING DIFFICULT LAYOFF SITUATIONS

An unusual characteristic of the State's budget crisis is that some employees are receiving layoff notices weeks or even months before their effective layoff date. The EAP has fielded several inquiries about awkward layoff situations.

- “Ever since I got my layoff notice, people don't look my way or talk with me. It's like I've got a disease. What can I do?”
- What should we expect when a laid off employee is asked to train in others who absorb some of their duties?”
- “How do we proceed with a new employee who ‘bumped’ a popular employee from their job?”

## INTERACTING WITH EMPLOYEES WHO'VE BEEN NOTIFIED OF THEIR LAYOFF

Whether out of respect, uncertainty, or fear of saying the wrong thing, people often don't acknowledge others who are going through a difficult transition; unfortunately, this creates further awkwardness and isolation for everyone. As a result, well-intentioned behavior can have an adverse effect: “Sometimes I get the feeling that my lay-off somehow scared off some of my friends and co-workers.”

It may feel uncomfortable and inadequate to “break the ice” at first, but the worst thing is to do nothing at all. Here are suggestions about how to treat a laid off colleague.

- Relate to the person, not to their layoff status. Don't treat them differently than before. Be yourself. Avoid pity. Simple understanding is enough. Don't avoid or isolate them. Keep in touch; be available.
- Determine how private the colleague wants to be. If you've had a very close relationship with the colleague, ask them directly. Otherwise, check with their supervisor or a colleague who is close to the employee and may know their preference regarding privacy.
- Try not to avoid eye contact. Whether in conversation or simply passing in the hall, let them know that they have not changed in your eyes.

- Don't feel you have to say something. But if your relationship has always included talk or greetings, you might say “I'm sorry” or leave a card to say “I care.” Offer lunch, coffee, or something fun that you've done before.
- The employee may be in a daze, may cry for no apparent reason, or may want to feel invisible. Be ready for mental confusion, difficulty making decisions, etc; offer to help with work tasks and decision-making.
- Avoid dumping your story or advice on them: contrary to what you may believe, you may not understand their particular experience. If you have a relevant experience, you may briefly reference it so that they don't feel so alone. If you believe that you have helpful information to share, ask before providing it.
- Speak up if you're uncomfortable. If you think that you haven't time to listen effectively, respectfully let the person know that you'd like to find another time to talk with them. Tell them that what they're saying is important. If they think that they can't wait to talk, you could offer to help them find another resource (a friend, family member, or EAP, for example).
- If you doubt your own ability to listen patiently or to help someone, consider consulting with the EAP yourself for guidance or coaching.

## TRAINING IN THE LAYOFF REPLACEMENT

It is a fact that when most positions are eliminated, the remaining employees will have to absorb at least some of the work. Since the employee who is laid off has the most current information about how their duties should be done, it is reasonable to want that employee to pass their wisdom on to others.

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If time allows, provide the laid off employee some time to adjust to their situation before assigning them the awkward task of training others into their duties. They are more likely to want to help others once they have some certainty about their own situation. Ideally, for example, that employee would first have time to pursue some employment options and to gain some confidence about their future.

It is reasonable to expect an employee to be hurt or angry about these expectations. Give them an opportunity to be sincerely “heard.” They may never “get over it” completely, but they may become more ready to help out.

Let the employee know that their training will ultimately help their colleagues and/or their customers.

## **THE HUMAN IMPACT OF “BUMPING”**

“Bumping” often is accompanied by a unique brand of anguish. Employees may feel awkward or even guilty about exercising their bumping rights. Employees with less seniority feel vulnerable and uncertain. Colleagues may become protective of one another and workgroup factions can develop.

Keep in mind that people don’t usually function at their best under such situations. There may be increased tension and defensiveness for a while. Remind yourself to not take other’s choices or behaviors personally during a time when everyone is stressed.

Remember that the person who bumped into a position will need time to develop skills for the job. They may be missing familiar relationships and routines; they may miss the confidence, knowledge and interest that they enjoyed in their previous role. They may be uncertain about how long they want to stay in their new job – one which may have simply been the only state government alternative available to them at the time.

This is a time to consider the possibility that the person most irritating to you is doing their best with the information that they have.

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This is also a time to consider an individual or management team consultation with the State EAP. EAP Counseling Services can be accessed toll-free in greater Minnesota at 1.866.477.1586 or 651.662.2586 in the metro area. The phone numbers for the EAP Management Call Center are 651.296.0765 or 800.657.3719.

The EAP Website: [www.doer.state.mn.us/eap/eap.htm](http://www.doer.state.mn.us/eap/eap.htm)