

# UPS AND DOWNS FOR LAYOFF SURVIVORS

Even when a change is considered to have a positive outcome such as “I’ve still got a job,” there is an adjustment process to new workplace conditions after a lay-off. This transition occurs whether one has retained their old job, or has been assigned new duties, or has “bumped” into a new position altogether.

The first stage is often described as “UNINFORMED OPTIMISM.” This means that an individual doesn’t know exactly how their life will be affected even though they may think they can imagine it.

As the change occurs and the realities begin, this attitude may move into “INFORMED PESSIMISM.” This is the point where an individual experiences how the change will affect them and begins to realize consequences.

At this point, a “CHECKING OUT” period may occur, which is a normal part of the process. This “checking out” can occur publicly or in our own thoughts. It is the point where fears, questions and challenges are on the surface and pessimism may be at its peak.

There may still be doubts in the next phase which is “HOPEFUL REALISM,” but an individual begins to believe that they can adapt and there is more hope about being able to move through the change process. As the change is integrated more completely, the next stage is referred to as “INFORMED OPTIMISM.” This is the place where more confidence is experienced, pessimism is decreasing and there is more focus on the new way of life.

During this process there are ways that each of us may act out, experience a drop in self-confidence or struggle with moving forward. Some common reactions are:

**1)** One may try to complete new responsibilities in the same way that one functioned before, and thus engage in “more of the same” behavior.

- This frequently falls short of the demands of the new workload and may add to one’s stress and tension. When one struggles to do a job in ways that aren’t working, it erodes one’s sense of competence, contribution, confidence and job satisfaction.

**2)** When one is fed up with a situation or demoralized, one sometimes focuses on doing just the basics of what is needed to get by. The attitude becomes one of resignation or obligation rather than being driven by any mission or enthusiasm for the work.

- One toll of this understandable response is increased vulnerability to stress; by contrast, high job commitment can be an antidote to stress.

- At this point each person needs to re-evaluate what enthusiasm still exists with the job, re-evaluate the “psychological contract” with their employer and consider what the toll is of just “trying to get by.”

**3)** Another common response for lay-off survivors is to function from a place of uncertainty and cautiousness. It stems from the perception that “if I don’t make decisions, I won’t make mistakes and draw attention to myself”.

- A person can live in that limbo for a period of time, but it keeps an individual in a reactive mode. What usually helps someone to move on, feel more confident and more satisfied, is to make proactive decisions.
- Creativity often stops when one is in a reactive mode and the dominant response can be anxiety and paralysis. To feel more energy after surviving a lay-off, it helps to step into as much decision making and self-direction as possible.

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4) It becomes essential to look realistically at what seems to have changed in one's job, and at what is challenged in one's values, work ethic and standards for measuring success.

- If one continues with previous measures of success, chances are the measurement comes up short. Lay-off survivors often encounter more work and/or different work that has been absorbed from elsewhere. Rethinking how one defines success and what the job satisfiers are can help reorient ways of measuring how the new version of the job is going .
- Re-evaluating measures of success may also reduce some of the self-recrimination that occurs from not getting as much work done as quickly as before.

To help clarify some of the changes, consider asking yourself these questions:

- 1) Do I understand the new organizational chart, reporting relationships, expectations of me and current mission of my work group? If not, how can I clarify?
- 2) What skills and experience seem most necessary in my new work role? Do I feel capable of acquiring them? Why? Why not?
- 3) What skills and competencies have I used in the past that may not be as useful currently?
- 4) Do I know how others view my skills and contributions? Have I asked anyone recently and gotten direct feedback or am I making assumptions?

5) What were my job satisfiers before the lay-offs? What can I retain of those in my new role? What satisfiers have I lost that may effect my attitude?

6) Have friends at work been laid off and has my support system changed? Do I need/want to do anything differently to build some new work relationships?

7) If I picture myself at work 6 months from now, what do I want my attitude to be? What do I want to feel good about? What do I want to have learned?

8) What am I telling myself about my job and the value of my work? What affects my attitude and perceptions and what can I change?

9) What bothers me the most about what has changed at work? Is there anything that I can do about the changes?

10) Am I taking good care of myself during this time of transition? What do I want to do more of? What do I want to do less of?

It is helpful to try and notice your own stress level, attitude, and sense of job satisfaction. If you are concerned with how you are doing, look for support and consider contacting 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.

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